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# Our Master's Legacy: Belief and Ritual in Mission De L'esprit Saint

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OUR MASTER'S LEGACY:  
BELIEF AND RITUAL IN MISSION DE L'ESPRIT SAINT

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

By  
Dale Joseph Rose

August 2015

OUR MASTER'S LEGACY:  
BELIEF AND RITUAL IN MISSION DE L'ÉSPRIT SAINT

Date Recommended 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015

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I dedicate this thesis to my loving and supportive family: my mother Wanda Fay Rose, all of my Aunts, but especially Twilla and Ann, my uncle Warren Rose J.R. I also want to remember my dearly departed Aunt, and Second Mother Kimi Karamata Rose, and my Grandmother Della, knowing them has made it all worth it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the people who took the time to read over this document, and all of those who put many hard- hours into making it sound partially coherent. I am sure there is enough good karma in this single thesis to forgive the sins of four lifetimes! I also want to thank all of the people from the Mission that helped me to put together this thesis and tell this story, it would not have been possible without their help.

Merci!

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# OUR MASTER'S LEGACY: BELIEF AND RITUAL IN MISSION DE L'ÉSPRIT SAINT

Dale J. Rose

August 2015

128 Pages

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Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology

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This thesis is a folkloristic examination of the religious beliefs and rituals associated with members of a religious movement known as Mission De L'Ésprit Saint. Mission De L'Ésprit Saint is a Quebecois religious denomination which believes that their founder was the physical incarnation of the Holy Spirit, and the movement strives to continue the teachings which were laid down during his lifetime. The major components of Mission theology and history, as well as an introductory consideration of their cosmology and worldview will be the major focus of this document, as well as a consideration of the role that Folklore has in understanding marginal religious movements.

## Introduction

On April 17, 1871 in the town of St. George-de-Windsor, Québec, a child was born named Eugene, whose life would be the focus of a group of followers who called their movement Mission De L'Esprit Saint (The Mission). Eugene Richer dit la Fleche, affectionately called ERL, "the envelope that held the word of God," (ERL, *Les Documents*)<sup>1</sup> was believed by his followers to be the earthly incarnation of the Holy Spirit, and as was promised by Christ "he will guide you into all truth." The teachings of ERL, and of his successor Gustav Robitaille, are expansive, and deal with many topics both secular and sacred; what is more, these teachings, for those who hold them as sacred, are the foundation for a unique understanding of the world. As folklorists who work with religious belief and custom, we seek to understand what Leonard Primiano has called "religion as it is lived," (Primiano 1995:44). Marginal and emergent religious groups give us an ample view of the process whereby individuals apply doctrine to daily life.

Throughout my entire life, what people believe has been a source of endless fascination. From my earliest days in elementary school I would read books on religion, and I spoke constantly about religious subjects, at one point asking my mother if I could dress as Krishna for Halloween! This obsession with religious ideas caused me to read more and more, and as I delved further into the subject, I discovered the world of marginal religious beliefs, what I would happily call my lifelong passion. In the characters that spoke within these traditions I found an unlikely group of friends, who at their best showed people that heaven can be a reality, and that all of life was exceptionally important.



Undoubtedly much of my love for this subject, came from the unique religious orientation in which I was brought up. God is present in our lives, and all that we do matters. Although my family didn't advocate one specific religious tradition, speculations about the nature of reality, and our place in God's universe were always at the forefront of our discussions. This atmosphere which embraced wonder and mystery has allowed me to see the immense power that religion has, and the way that it orients people's lives. I cannot, and do not try, to say that religion is solely a power for good, and especially within the field of marginal religious beliefs there are many examples of people taking the power of belief and using it to produce evil, but to essentialize marginal religiosity to just that level, misses a great deal. Religion as a product of humanity expresses our complexity; and marginal religiosity, from my Romantic perspective, is the most dramatic expression of this momentous force.

As a student, I chose to pursue those degrees which I felt could best serve my research, and this is the main reason which led me to pursue my interest, with a degree in Folklore. Folklore among all of the disciplines, is unique in the attention that it gives in focusing on the precise details of human life and behavior. The discipline also, at its core, has a legacy of respect for its collaborators that I feel is especially important in working with groups whose beliefs have often been ridiculed. This highly ethical standard combined with Folklore's attention to detail make it a remarkable fit to consider marginal religious beliefs. In addition to our emphasis on respect for our subjects and having a strong desire for details and nuance, we go further to state explicitly that

we have no authoritative voice in determining the veracity of any religious claim. I point to the work of David Hufford and Peter Rojcewicz, both of whom have worked to show that inherit disbelief on the part of the researcher is no more objective than belief, and that if we automatically assume that the claims of our collaborators are false, then that limits our ability to work and speak about the subject. In all, although I have chosen to keep interpretative sections to a minimum within this work and focus primarily on content, I would say that the manner in which I have considered this subject is what is so uniquely folkloristic about my work.

Although the majority of my work within the sphere of marginal religion has been directed toward English Millenarianism, I actually owe my discovery of this movement to the film *Lilies*. After watching the film, which takes place in Quebec, I did a Wikipedia search to find a list of new religious movements in the province. As I was scrolling down the list, I came across *Mission De L'Ésprit Saint* which was written in red, meaning that there was not an article available in English, so I read the French one. From the beginning, this group seemed so incredibly interesting that I felt a compulsion to work with them. I then began to read other information on the movement, essentially two articles in English, and a few more in French. I contacted the St. Paul movement through their website contact page, and began speaking to several members of the community through email. I also contacted Canadian Sociologist, Dr. Susan J. Palmer, who was the author of the two English articles. In speaking to members of the community, and at looking at available material on the movement, I felt that there was a strong

need to write an introductory work that would address the major beliefs of the group.

In speaking with the members of the community, it was made acutely clear that they felt that they had been significantly offended by the work that was written about them in the past. The French articles about the group are extremely critical, and I felt only portrayed the most sensationalized factors of the movement. In response to this, I came to this project with the intention of presenting the beliefs of my collaborators in a respectful way. While acknowledging that I cannot remain completely objective about how I look at their faith, I have tried to present it in a way that would resonate with people inside the movement, as well as having applicability for the academic community. My intention is to show the belief and practice of this community both as I have seen it through my ethnographic work, and as I had read it in the documents that I have been given, showing the complex relationship that exists between the writings of this community and the ritual applications that bring these teachings to life. I also intend to convey the role that oral history and memorates serve to set the context for the written works in these communities, and to highlight the way that members make use of the interplay between oral and written works in forming and applying doctrine.

All fieldwork has challenges, and there were some situations that required unique solutions on my part as a researcher. For one, since there is a lot in the theology of the Mission that is highly syncretic and difficult to summarize, I found it difficult to attach affirmative statements of beliefs to any one individual.

“You know you just don’t want to say anything about God, and have it be wrong,” was how one individual from the St. Paul-de-Joliette group put it to me. As a result, when I quote from my fieldwork, I often name the assembly that the person spoke to me from, rather than citing a specific name.

Also, as the Mission is a religious movement split amongst five unaffiliated groups, I have chosen to develop this thesis primarily around an interpretation of the Everett Street and the St. Paul De Joliette assemblies, with some input from the assembly at Lavaltrie. Each one of the five assemblies have their own perspective on the absolute role of the movement, and the splits have had a great deal to do with internal disagreements, some of which occurred relatively soon after the death of ERL. My discussion of the Lavaltrie interpretation comes primarily from the work of Dr. Susan Palmer who worked with that movement, along with some sparse telephone and personal interviews with two members of this community. While I tried to contact the two remaining groups, one in California and the other not far from Laval, I was unable to reach them, and this thesis is written without their cooperation.

In writing this thesis, I worked from two main bodies of lore, the written sources of the movement, and information that I gained through two intensive interview periods with the movement, and other scholars who had some prior experience with this group. As members of the Mission consider their written documents to be sacred, it is generally with great reservation that they allow outsiders to have access to them; however I was fortunate in that both the Everett and St. Paul assemblies allowed me access to the entire body of religious work.

The written documents of the movement, often referred to as *Les Documents*, by members, are a vast collection of theological writings on an untold number of topics. The core documents of the writings are the two volumes of letters, written by ERL to his followers, along with the writings and hymns of ERL's successor Gustav Robitaille. Robitaille's work is particularly expansive, and fills several volumes, known in their collective as *Les Propos*. These are present extend beyond a hundred separate works.

In addition to these basic documents, I also made two trips to Montreal in March and July of 2014. During these trips I was able to meet members of the movement for interviews and to attend services. Also I carried on a long email correspondence with members from both the Everett and St. Paul groups. I thought that by using both the written sources, and in person interviews I would be able to show the orality of the movement, and how it is very much an emerging tradition.

Reflexivity is exceptionally important when one is working with marginalized religious groups, and with belief in general, and I have included those thoughts which I feel to be relevant to the broader missions of the paper. However, due to the fact that the Mission is so under considered, I felt that my primary concern must be in the quality of information itself. I tried in many ways to follow in the footsteps of Leonard Primiano's work with the Followers of Father Divine. (Primiano 1997) Primiano's work seems to me to be exceptionally applicable due to the fact that, like me, he was working with a religious community which taught that their founder was the incarnation of God. Primiano

considered the claims of the movement very seriously, and made many attempts to adequately introduce the reader to the beliefs of the movement, and he also relied on the testimonies of the faithful, a format that I have followed through in my own research. As I move into the more controversial aspects of Mission theology, issues related to the role and function of women within the movement, the nature of the Godhead, their ideas about human origin and the role of the mother, stigma will become an exceptionally important component.

Stigma, I understand is a very difficult term to work with, and has been hotly debated in scholarship; however, by using this term I am referring to the definition which was provided by Erving Goffman, which is: “The phenomenon whereby an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by his/her society is rejected as a result of the attribute. Stigma is a process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity.” (Goffman 1963) Thus for members of the community, they know first-hand how different their beliefs are from the general public, and I had to understand that in their speaking with me, there was a trust that I would at least be accurate. Accuracy within the Mission means an attention to both the written doctrines of the movement, and in the numerous stories which come out of the Mission’s oral tradition which provide a context for their interpretation.

I should also say that as a person I have had some emotional reactions to the material which I will be considering, and as much as I will try to make it apparent which conclusions I feel have been affected most strongly by my emotive responses, undoubtedly all of the conclusions will have been garnered

from a person writing with certain ethical stances which are not shared by my collaborators, and I feel that this would be a fruitful place to discuss some of the limitations which come about as a result of this disagreement between ethical spheres. Although I feel that David Hufford has nicely spoken about the disparity between the views of our collaborators, and the views of the ethnographer, I feel that there is still ample room to go further, and indeed my future research will be focused on the implications that arise from studying systems of alternate worldviews.

Barbara Myerhoff, in the film *In Her Own Time*, makes a rather beautiful statement about the role of the observer in looking at communities which are not his or her own: “You study what is happening to others by studying what is going on within yourself, you become the data-gathering instrument” (Myerhoff, 1981). Furthermore, in another article, written with Jay Ruby, Myerhoff sings the great importance that comes along with understanding one’s own role in the research which they are conducting, and describes the entire concept of reflexivity as “the capacity of any system of signification to turn back upon itself, to make itself its own object by referring to itself” (Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982).

However, there are certain points about this perspective that I also found to be very uncomfortable, and counter-intuitive. I was trying to understand a religious system which was greatly different from the one that I have, and although I must be honest about how I interacted with the information, because this will add context for my writing, at the end of the day I was still presenting their beliefs. Recently I have come across an un-published article from Jeff Todd

Titon that articulates much of the reserve that I had toward the reflexive ethnological model of Myerhoff and Ruby:

Myerhoff and Ruby's is a weak version of reflexivity because it assumes that if only authors are honest with themselves they can uncover their biases and assumptions. While it is laudable for authors to tell us who they are, I doubt that merely through self---inspection they are in a position to know. First, authors may not understand their motives very well...Second, despite their attempts to articulate their assumptions, writers who reflect upon their ideas may simply deceive themselves. At best, then, what I am calling a weak version of reflexivity produces naïve confessions; at worst, it makes self-deception. (Tipton 1989)

As I could understand both the thoughts of Myerhoff and Ruby, as well as the opinion voiced by Titon, I tried to merge the two by keeping a solid focus on description, as well as the importance of recording personal interactions with the material.

I feel that this method is the best possible way of approaching the ideas of the Mission, and I think it reflects a perspective unique to folklore's attention to ethnography. The majority of information that I had access to about the Mission was written from those within the religious studies background; as a result there was a great deal written about the movement that presented it as a whole, and ignored both the splintering of the movement and the immense theological diversity. From the religious studies perspective, I believe that a great deal of the dynamism and diversity of the Mission was lost, and many inherent biases of the



discipline were not addressed, and I felt this called out for folkloristic interpretation. However saying that, there is no guarantee that my collaborators will completely agree with my findings.

David Hufford in his article “The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies,” asserts that there will forever be a gap between the academic and personal levels of religious investigation. Hufford acknowledging this: “We must learn to tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity in our knowledge as primary goals (always sought, never completely achieved)” (Hufford, 1995:60). Hufford then asserts the need for two sets of “rules,” which clearly define these boundaries, and provide us a model through which to examine religious testaments which are not our own. (Hufford, 1995) I thoroughly have embraced the perspectives provided by the four scholars mentioned, and I believe that it provides a firm theoretical basis through which we might consider the religious beliefs of the Mission. I think that each one of these perspectives offers another look at one section of a vast and complicated ideological puzzle that is being constructed by the ethnographer; and I also accept that many of the theorists mentioned do come from opposing viewpoints, but I think that through their different voices, we come closer to something of validity to say. We must learn to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty in our ethnographic methods, and while each one of these perspectives might not fit easily with one another, each one’s contribution is valid and brings needed insight.

Furthermore, although I am not directly addressing the issues surrounding the process of group cohesion (see Taves, 2014), I do assert that for

groups which hold ideas dramatically outside of the mainstream, interior logic is exceptionally important, and just acknowledging the separation between the personal and the scholastic does not seem to adequately address the issue, and furthermore does little to show how members inside the movement make sense of their documents. So, in addition to the theoretical perspective which I gained from Taves and Hufford, I have also found the work of Wouter Hanegraaf, an esotericist:

The principal theoretical tool to safeguard scientific legitimacy in this situation is the distinction between *emic* and *etic*. [according to the distinction provided by Kenneth Pike] Emic denotes the believer's point of view. On the part of the researcher, the reconstruction of this emic perspective requires an attitude of empathy which excludes personal biases as far as possible. Scholarly discourse about religion, on the other hand, is not emic but etic. Scholars may introduce their own terminology and make theoretical distinctions which are different from those of the believers themselves (Hanegraaf, 1998).

Thus by working with a reflexive attitude, with a gearing toward a sympathetic approximation of the beliefs of this movement, I might highlight my personal feelings and observations which occurred while doing fieldwork, along with a strong desire to inform the reader of the beliefs of the movement in a way that is consistent with their emic legitimizations.

Folklore I also feel is a perfect vehicle for me to pursue both of these desires, and I feel that the particular emphasis that the discipline places on

cooperation and collaboration with our informants is the perfect vehicle to consider this movement. Another voice which paved the way for the type of research that I wanted to present in this chapter came from the work of Elaine Lawless. I admire the work of Lawless, because like Primiano, there is a strong emphasis on communicating the essence and nuances of the faith combined with a voice for the researcher who is experiencing the reality of this unique religious dimension. I have also made use of the concept articulated by her of collaborative ethnography. Although the primary way that Lawless did this, was to allow her collaborators to read through what she was writing, something that I also did, I relied on oral formulations, meaning that I would restate the doctrines and history that I was being taught, and wait for the confirmation of my conversation partner. At some points, this seemed rather pedantic, and as though I was repeating everything that I was told; but I felt that it really was a way for me to get involved with what I was writing on a personal level, and it helped me to make sure that I was highlighting nuances that members of the community would highlight.

Also, following from the work of Anthropologist Young and Goulet, in their work *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, I attempted to treat the writings of the founders of the Mission with reverence, and followed some of the daily practices of devout Mission members. This took the form of observing two daily customs performed by Mission faithful, the eating of clover and the drinking of warm water first thing in the morning, and although these acts were not exceptionally taxing on me personally, I did feel as though by

doing them I gained another perspective on the beliefs and the practices of the movement. Then, as I was advised, I would read from the writings for thirty minutes in the morning, allowing me to go wherever my hand fell.

Finally, I wanted as best as I could throughout this thesis, to capture the power that religious belief plays in the constructing of everyday reality for members of the Mission, and to hit on the transcendent quality and connection that members feel they have, not just with one another, but with God. Members of the Mission believe that they walked with GOD in the flesh, and in some cases they have specific prayers and promises that are unique only to them, and this creates a closeness and a sense of the impossible becoming possible that is unique to their movement. They are imbued with a sense of wonder and of assurance that the majority of us can never feel, and there is something to envy there. It is Mission transcendence that I most wanted to capture, an element that is often left out of conventional understandings and investigations of religious truths: “What is most often left out of the hidden definitions of religion which shape the study but which are included in the understanding and experiences of practitioners of religion, are the key issues of faith and transcendence. Although not all religions have a concept of a supernatural power, they do all share a belief in a transcendent reality as we know it. What we miss in our secularized notions of religion is a wide-reaching impact of the belief in transcendence” (Goldstein 1995). To capture the feelings of transcendence in the lives of members of the Mission was my major goal, and I hope I have done that.

## Chapter 1

### The Movement's History and Background

*“Wherever the master went, it flourished...It was a time ripe for the picking.”*(Everett, conversation with N.M. 9 March, 2014)

The importance that members of the Mission place upon the history of their movement, and on world history in general, is one of the most surprising things that I discovered on my first visit in 2013. There were constant references to world events, and throughout the writings, both Eugene Richer Dit La Fleche and his successor Gustav Robitaille used historical and current events to show the movements and works of God. It is therefore appropriate to give some historical notes about the history of the movement, and give some indications about the religious climate in which ERL would make his declarations.

As has been mentioned earlier, ERL was born in St. Paul-De-Windsor, a town located approximately one hundred and three miles east of Montreal. His rearing seems to have been typical of other Catholic Quebecois families, in the sense that he was baptized and raised within the Catholic Church, and his parents worked in agriculture, although there is little documented information about his early life. Although there are some internal debates within the community about the validity of his being baptized, he was at the very least present at his christening in 1871. Since the Catholic Church is seen by many inside the movement as the literal and primary representation of Satan on the earth, it is understandable that there is some emotional ambiguity as to their founder's

christening, and there are many stories which foreshadow the eventual break that ERL would have with the Catholic faith. One of the stories, which I found in the *Témoignages* of Robitaille, was quoted to me when I asked of ERL's involvement with the Catholic religion, and is also unique in that it alludes to ERL's ability as a healer, a fact that will feature prominently in the early history of the movement. Stories of the events of ERL's life and the miracles that he performed are very often shared in this way: there is a common or essentialized version for common use, most commonly a traditional oral story, and an official version which is written down in the movement's expansive body of literature, known collectively as *Les Documents* (Palmer & Finn, 1995).

One such tale, which is unique in that it is one of the few stories to come from the childhood of ERL, show that even as an infant he possessed miraculous powers. It is also seen to be a forecast of how latter in the history of the Mission they would come to feel about the Catholic Church. The story has it that a sick woman, who had heard through a Mr. Corimer of the miraculous healings which had taken place in connection with ERL, wanted to go and receive for herself a healing. She held the infant and was miraculously healed. In appreciation, the healed woman went to place a scapular around the neck of the child, and it appeared as though the necklace was choking the infant. "The mother would go to the cradle, where she would see her little one almost blue, choked by the cursed string of the infernal scapular." (Robitaille, 2013: 48) "Therefore this proves," says Robitaille, "that the master never belonged to the Roman Church, even during the unconscious age of the cradle. I shall go even

further still, since he was conceived, the pope, that is to say Satan, made him a prisoner within his flowered walls where the vipers crawl” (Robitaille, 2013:59).

Stories of ERL’s childhood were also filled with numerous accounts in which the young boy exhibited exceptional religious insights and abilities. “You’ve heard about how they found Jesus in the temple, with all of the scholars and priests around him—this was every day for the Master, every day. Can you imagine?” (Everett, conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014). In the chronology provided by the Everett Street mission, they recount when ERL was seven years old, he told one of his teachers, “there is no mystery with God” (Robitaille, 2013: 360). As this was his third day in school, he was sent home.

There remains relatively little information about ERL’s life between his youth, and his joining the police force in Montreal. Some of the only information available comes from the Everett Street mission, where they record that he went down to Florida at age nineteen to find work. Apart from a few other stray comments here and there in the literature, most of the information that we have about the early thought of ERL comes from about the time that he joined as a third class constable on 12 January 1894.

As I have been told from various members of the movement, ERL’s joining the Montreal Police force, confirms in their minds his trustworthy nature, and one of the most circulated portraits within the community is of ERL in his police uniform. “There are many times where he would come to assemblies after being at work, he would show up still wearing his police uniform.”(Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014) Although ERL started the force working as a third class

detective, it was not long before he was appointed as a guard at the Windsor branch of the Canadian Postal service. (Robitaille 2013:360) His appointment at this office, like that of his appointment as a police man in general, confirms for many within the group the special trustworthy nature that the master had: “You know back in those days, the post office that was like a bank. Money was coming and going through it, and it was the main way that you exchanged and transferred currency.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 March 2013)

In the writing of Robitaille, there is a story of ERL’s bravery which Robitaille says is “worthy of the exploits of Homer,” and furthermore illustrates the unique way that members of the Mission see their stories of *Le Maître*:<sup>2</sup>

A certain house of ill-repute, as there exists in all big cities, had given the police a lot of trouble. In a bungled raid, the bandits and the prostitutes had together managed to expel quite a few policemen, and the situation was serious. The police chief called for the Master (ERL) and entrusted him with the job of clearing out the den...however the Master did prevail over the felons, despite the conniving of the brothel’s madam who tried to subjugate the Master with a treacherous and scandalous trick. More degenerate than the gangsters themselves, her accomplices, as she was trying to grab the Master’s scrotum from behind while the bandits attached him from the front. But the divine Policeman, who saw as much behind as in front, gave the gorgon a swift kick that sent her sprawling into a corner of the room, and still alone, the sublime hero took down six



armed bandits and brought them to the police station, disarmed and cuffed (Robitaille 2013:247).

Considering also that it is revealed later that this same brothel was often frequented by members of the Catholic Church (Robitaille 2013: 247), the story adds another symbolic level, that of absolute good vs. absolute evil. This tendency to try to elevate experiences, from the fantastic to the most mundane, to have universal significance is something that many religions share in common, and this is taken to extreme measures within marginal or emergent religious traditions. Dr. Jane Shaw, who worked with the English Panacea Society, noticed that even the most simple and common daily interactions might be the source of universal spiritual significance, is likewise a common factor in the history of the Mission, and it must be understood from the very beginning that there are no small occurrences, and everything pulses with untold spiritual importance (Shaw 2011).

When I first read this story, as I was going through the *Testimonies*, I was really surprised to read the word scrotum in a religious text. It does seem a little strange to be that anatomically specific when speaking about the deity. I feel that this definitely must come from my Jewish background, in which the concept of an incarnated God is something quite foreign to me. But, I think the interesting thing for many of the faithful of the Mission is just that fact. They are amazed at the fact that God had taken on human flesh, and all the implications of that. They further, as I will show throughout this thesis, are very comfortable with the use of explicit anatomical language. At first as I say, it was difficult for me to find

comfort with, but later on, as I was reflecting on the implications of their theology, I began to see the significance that the literal had for members of the movement.

In addition to finding his first professional employment as a policeman, ERL also was married to a woman named Marie Louise Odile Adèle David, when he was twenty-three at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on 25 February 1895. (Robitaille 2013, 361) Although the marriage was only to last eight years, the union was later taken to be a representation of how the Catholic Church had fallen away from God. Just as was the case with ERL wearing the scapular as a child, so too, the fact that he was married within the Catholic denomination was a source of major confusion among members of the faith. *Le Questionnaire*, the main teaching source used by the movement, which serves in some ways that same purpose as does a Catholic catechism. In this work Robitaille makes explicit the relationship that ERL had to the Church at the time of his marriage: **“So how is it that the Master allowed a Catholic priest to perform the Wedding?”**<sup>4</sup> The Marriage was a civil act only, as Jesus went to the temple, so as to not incur the wrath of his contemporaries, the priests and the Pharisees. Being God, he did not need any puppet to unite him to a woman, but in order to avoid scandal and prevent his persecutions by beasts in human form, he humbled himself to that point” (Robitaille 1958: Q197). “See the master was never a Catholic, never; but just as Jesus allowed himself to be counted among a certain group or tribe, so did the Master. I mean it is ridiculous for anyone to assume

that he was a Catholic, just read what he says.”(Everett Conversation with N.M. 27 July 2013)

Nevertheless, the earliest incarnation of the Mission took the form of an orthodox Marian devotional society named Notre Dame de le Sacré Coeur de la Régénération. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Mary, which was based around a series of apparitions which appeared to Margaret Mary Alacoque from 1673-1675 was an extremely widespread devotional practice in the early twentieth century, and was exceptionally widespread in religious Quebec. The newfound interest that occurred for devotion to the Sacred Heart was in part due to the work of Sister Mary of the Divine Heart (née: Maria Droste zu Vischering, 1863-1899), who asked in 1898 that Pope Leo XIII consecrate the entire world to the heart of Jesus (Chasle 1906). The Pope was stirred by this request and issued in 1899 his *Annum Sacrum* which expressed his support for this practice and made a commitment that this consecration should take place on 11 June of that same year (Leo XIII 1899).

Years before there was any formal appeal to the Pope for the recognition of *Sacré-Coeur* as a formal devotional path, it had been a source of inspiration associated with many causes. During the War of 1870 which brought about the end of the French second Empire, French soldiers went to war with Germany shouting, *Vive le Sacré-Coeur*. (Jonas 1998:55) However, with the words of *Annum Sacrum*, the entire world was called to be a part of this grand move to make religion a central component of the life of all nations:

This world-wide and solemn testimony of allegiance and piety is especially appropriate to Jesus Christ, who is the Head and Supreme Lord of the race. His empire extends not only over Catholic nations and those who, having been duly washed in the waters of holy baptism, belong of right to the Church, although erroneous opinions keep them astray, or dissent from her teaching cuts them off from her care; it comprises also all those who are deprived of the Christian faith, so that the whole human race is most truly under the power of Jesus Christ (Leo XIII, 1899).

Being under “the power of Jesus Christ,” also meant a personal commitment to being a part of Christ’s kingdom, and it is difficult not to realize the radical impetus to change the world to fit the image of its maker.

With this revolutionary commitment, people throughout the Catholic world were feeling the consecration of the world in personal terms, and wanted very much to be a part of this expansive revolutionary commitment. This was especially true for ERL, and for his brother Israel, and they would found together the society which would come to be Mission De L’Ésprit Saint.

Although written materials about the founding of Notre Dame de le Sacre Coeur de la Régénération remain relatively few, Eugene Berube, a former member of the Mission, and someone who has the largest private collections of early Mission materials, states that the first member of the Richer family who was swept up in this tide of religious piety was ERL’s older brother Israel. According to Berube, Israel reports that he had been visited by the Virgin Mary in the spring of 1904, in the church of the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament. During the period

between his first vision of the Virgin and 1906, when he was to move to Montreal, two major developments happened: for one, there were repeated visions of the Virgin Mary appearing to him, and he was to read the work of another populist religious movement, that of St. Bernadette Soubirous. Israel felt a certain affinity, since like her, he wanted to heal the human race and make a lasting contribution to the human race in his healing them from the effects of living on earth. (Berube 2015).

In 1906, according to Berube, Israel moved to Montreal to live with the Fathers of the Blessed Sacrament, and began to have visitations by the Virgin on an almost daily basis. (Berube 2015). Berube records in his documents that Israel had the reputation in his village of being a preacher, and was very excited to spread his ideas, and it seems that between the years of 1906 to 1912, he had acquired around him a small following who met together in each other's homes to pray and recall visions and miracles that had happened. In one of the documents held by Susan Palmer, the first English writer to publish on the Mission, Palmer states that in the early days of the movement, Israel tried to teach others who attended his devotional society to see visions; and it seems that a direct experience of the divine was a common desire in early Mission meetings, with the followers being called by their neighbors in Rhode Island, "holy-rollers" (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014).

Although there is some disagreement about when ERL became the leader of the group, Berube has it as 1912 while the sources I have spoken to within the movement say that he was always a central component, the two brothers along

with their friend Abbé Godbout founded the group Notre Dame de la Sacré Coeur de la Régénération, and had the first meeting in 1913 (Palmer 2013). The group continued as a Catholic devotional society dedicated to the practice of Sacré-Coeur, and Israel traveled to Rome to inform Pope Pius X of the Mission of the Holy Spirit, although there is some disagreement as to what his original message was. In Palmer's documents, it seems that Israel's goal in going to Rome was to found another specific religious order, whose main intention was to bless and baptize the infant fetus, and also to regenerate the bodies of mothers, without any reference to ERL's incarnation as the Holy Spirit (Palmer 2015).

However, the understanding that members who I have interviewed have had about this first trip was that it was Israel's intentions to inform the Pope that the Holy Spirit was alive and well in Montreal. "He went to Rome," said one Mission member, "to tell the Pope about ERL, and of course the Pope did nothing. They were filled with pride, and could not accept what they were being told." (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014) This also fits in with the timeline that was given by the Everett Street group which says: "the Master sends his brother Israel and Abbe Goddard to Rome to present the Mission of the Holy Spirit to the Vatican" (Robitaille 2013:360).

Identifying what exactly was Israel's point in going to Rome may give us some insight into the major split that came about in the group in 1915, in which one group chose to remain within the Catholic Church, and the other choosing to follow ERL. Within Mission doctrine, the Catholic Church's rejection of ERL is one of the central framing perspectives which orient believers with the outside

world, and this issue would arise to greater and greater prominence within Mission doctrine (Taves 2013). Framing perspectives limit the realm of the possible and give broad explanations about the nature of reality. They are a component of worldview, defined by Dégh as “the sum total of subjective interpretations” (Dégh 1994:247). They are the central stories which constitute reality for a particular group.

Whatever the message that Israel was to give to the Pope, what is clear is that it was the beginning of an entirely new religious revelation which would transform this orthodox Marian devotional society into the Mission of the Holy Spirit.

Within the movement, when one hears the term *Le Consécration*, it refers to when the Virgin Mary came and appeared to ERL and told him that he was the incarnation of the Holy Spirit. The most complete version that I have found comes from Robitaille, and seems to be the one most accepted by all three of the Mission assemblies that I worked with. According to the chronology which was provided to me by the Everett street assembly, between September 22 through November, there is no specific date mentioned in November, “Joseph Marie Haché and Magloire Gosselin witness the consecration of Mary, Mother of Jesus, in a vision of over the altar of the Père du Saint-Sacrement, Mount Royal Street, Montreal”(Robitaille 2013:360). In this vision, Mary the mother of Jesus appears to ERL, and hands him the child Jesus and informs him “that it was 2000 years since the Archangel Gabriel had appeared to her, and it was now his mission, as the Holy Spirit Incarnate, to bless the wombs of mothers in order to bring forth

the children of God” (Robitaille 2013: 187; St. Paul conversations with E.F. and G. B. 2014).

“That moment when Mary appeared, this was when it all came together,” as it was said to me by one member of the St. Paul assembly. Robitaille recognizes this time, and says: “What Mr. Haché saw is, in a way, the syntheses of our doctrine. The Master made the unbelievable prodigy of pushing back twenty centuries gone by, twenty centuries of idolatry, to show to two witnesses, in retrospective tableaux scenes that had occurred in Nazareth and Bethlehem, at the visit of the Angel and at the birth of the Messiah, the perfect model of Eugénisme, in other words the art of being well born, which is the fundamental art of paradise since it assures paradise to its heirs” (Robitaille 2013:190).

Thus, with the approval of the Virgin Mary, ERL was to change the name of the movement that he had started with his brother, and rename it in light of his new revelation. He would become the instrument through which his followers would be able to remake the world, and produce children of the *bonne volonté* (ERL 1921:2-18). After the revelation about the nature of ERL, the movement has some internal disagreements, which could either be explained by the information which was provided by Berubé, or by the standard explanation which was provided to me by several of the mission assemblies which I have spoken with; that the strength of the Catholic church was the sole reason for the falling away that took place after the revelation of the consecration. “You just don’t understand the power the Catholic Church had over the mind of the people, whatever it said, they believed. I mean they could see miracles every day, but



because they could not think for themselves, they would not be moved.”(Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March, 2014)

In any case, ERL took with him fifty-five of his closest followers, and sought to carry out his divine mission. After the split, it is interesting to note the differences in divine manifestations. In the early days when the group was still with Notre Dame de le Sacré Coeur de la Régénération, the typical focus was on seeing visions of the Virgin, and being more acutely aware of God’s presence in all things; afterwards, there was an increasing focus on the miracles done by ERL. Montreal became the new Nazareth, and everywhere members saw the marks of Divine power, and possibilities. Throughout the period of 1913 to 1917, stories of ERL appearing in two places at once, answering prayers in dreams, and miraculous appearances are all a major component of early Mission doctrines. The largest written repository of these stories remain within the *Les Témoignages* of Robitaille, however there are also numerous early stories that still circulate orally in Mission assemblies. Due to the strong familial associations of many Mission members, there are often personal stories of the Master working special miracles for certain individuals, which are passed down through the family. These stories add vibrancy and personal connection to the movement, along with first-hand accounts of how members found their way to faith in ERL. One such story told to me by a member of the St. Paul assembly, was based around how a woman whom I will call Madame X., an early follower of the movement, came to accept the authority of ERL: “She had heard of the Master, and wanted to see if he was the real thing, you know, and she wrote down a list of

things about her ‘personal things’ to see if he would know them. Well after the assembly, when the master was talking, she went up to him, to ask him a question about something he had said during the meeting. He turned around and said to her before speaking; ‘This is the answer to your question, and to answer the questions you have in your pocket,’ then he proceeded to go down through the list, question by question. ‘Yeah he’s God, she said.’ And the X family have been members ever since” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 3 August 2015).

There were other miracles which were reported in ERL’s stay after the consecration, he resurrects a man at the Place d’Armes, and performs numerous other witnesses to his power as the Holy Spirit. These years in Montreal, was also the period in which this new religious group attained the name “Richerism,” which was presumably a pejorative term based on the reaction which Robitaille has to being asked if he was associated with “Richerism” (Robitaille, 2013: 5) From Robitaille’s writings, I think we get a clear sense that he felt that this term was too casual, and did not seem to account for the gravity of ERL’s claims. It seemed to carry at least for Robitaille, a degradation of the claims of their movement, and he even refers to it as being a vulgar usage in his *Testimonies* (Robitaille 2013).

Also, news of ERL’s ability as a healer was apparently being circulated as several of the accounts given by Robitaille seem to correspond to this trait with ERL. There is a story from Robitaille which is titled “The Magnetizer,” in which a man comes to the assembly to see a great healer, and to which ERL responds:

“You have come to see a great magnetizer, you are greatly mistaken, for you are seeing the master of all things” (Robitaille 2013: 40).

In 1917, ERL was brought to court by his ex-wife who was suing him for alimony (Robitaille 2013: 362). When she did not show up to court, the case was thrown out and ERL was excused from his duties to pay alimony. Although officially, the case was simply about whether or not ERL had a financial responsibility toward his wife, what it meant for members within the Mission, was that the state was attacking the movement. Feeling this pressure, ERL tried to become less tied to Montreal, and began traveling about the general area, staying in places where there were Mission assemblies, and moving back and forth between Canada, and the US.

On 13 February 1920, ERL and the widow Armandine Godard, travel to Adamsville, Rhode Island, which was to become the first communal home of the movement, and one of the most important places for the development of Mission doctrine. Over the course of a year, ERL, with the financial assistance of Armandine Godard, bought up a large swath of properties in the area around Adamsville, which included the area which would be called Goat Island. Goat Island and the thirty five acres outside it, was to become the place where the people in whom ERL put so much faith were to live. At the Lavaltrie assembly there is a retirement home for older members of the hall directly adjacent to the sanctuary; when I asked what it was built for, I got a firm answer that it was an attempt to make the vision that ERL had started at Adamsville a reality.

(Lavaltrie, conversation with E.D, 31 July, 2014)

Adamsville was also significant because it was the first place that believers in ERL could be together and actively think about and consider deeply the implications of their religious doctrine. If one would like to use a historical comparison, the experience of the Mission in Adamsville, was akin to the experience at the council of Nicaea. At no other point had members been in such close contact, and at no point had they had the level of freedom that they found on the island. Needless to say, as with everything else in the story of the Mission, there were many stories that arose from their experience. I feel based on looking at the chronology of the group, that Adamsville was where the beginning of the *Questionnaire*, the most authoritative text on Mission doctrine, was written.

Members of the community worked at various manual jobs in the surrounding area, pooling their income and making it possible to continue life in the commune. The most significant building on the community, the temple, was inaugurated in early July, 1922. The community was an oddity to the local townspeople who gave them the designation as “holy rollers” (Info-secte 2014). It is from the *Fall River Herald* that one of the most famous stories, both outside and inside the Mission, was recorded: it revolves around the claim made by one of the followers that ERL had stopped a coming rainstorm. Of course this added even more stigma to the little community, and undoubtedly made life pretty difficult for some of the believers.

Stories of the time on the island are still very much a part of current discussion within the Mission, and at least one reference has been made to this era in every assembly that I have attended. One of the members of the St. Paul de

Joliette community, even told me a similar story on my first ride to attend worship at that assembly. “You see they were going to have service, I guess this was before they had a hall, and they were nervous about the weather, because the sky looked dark and they were afraid that it was going to rain. Then the Master comes out of his house and asks everyone, ‘what are you looking at?’ They of course point to the sky and say, ‘well it looks like it is going to rain.’ ‘Oh that,’ ERL said, ‘well I won’t let it rain until the assembly is over.’ And it didn’t rain.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014)

ERL’s control over nature is an especially prominent feature of the stories which come out of his experience in Rhode Island. Undoubtedly this has something to do with the fact that they were living on property which was very susceptible to the wrath of the ocean, elements quite unusual for the mostly urban faithful. Robitaille was particularly astonished at the fact that ERL seemed to be immune from being bitten by various insects. He gives us a small look into what summer was like in the water: “At low tide mostly and especially in the evening we would see millions of them [insects] surge up from the water, and we had all the trouble in the world to rid ourselves of them. Remarkably while we poor humans, unworthy and sinful, were being devoured by this birdy breed, the divine Lord was not being touched. While clouds of mosquitoes swarmed us and sometimes enveloped us, we did not see a single one near his majesty. Never did acknowledge the least sting or the least indication of profanation from the part of this flying vermin on the white and serene skin of this infinitely pure and perfect being” (Robitaille 2013: 87).

Fire also obeyed ERL:

When his majesty was living on the hill (Property purchased in 1921), he wanted, one day to give manifest proof of his almightiness. This took place in the month of July. The heat was equatorial... There were heaps of them (dry twigs) almost everywhere. The Lord set fire to one of those heaps saying: "He who commands to the sea and prevents it from overflowing, has also the power to conduct fire." He picked up a meagre twig and made an invisible line in the air, saying to the fire: "you shall not go any higher. I forbid you to." (Robitaille 2013: 47)

This particular story was quoted in a speech given during a sermon to illustrate that ERL had both known about the possibility of Nuclear power (fire) and he had the power to control it. "Nothing would happen except it be in his [ERL] will. (Lavaltrie conversation with E.D. 31 July 2014) Stories which show the power that ERL had over nature and of his fore-knowledge, abound in the oral legacy of the Mission. However, there are some instances where ERL claims responsibility for the making of earthquakes and of other natural disasters. It makes stories like this one relatively tame. However, as I read these, I must note that I felt on more than one occasion that these stories seem like the worst type of bragging, and quite offensive. However, I think it also should be noted that there is a heritage for tales like this, and it is found in the Torah. In the Bible there are numerous references to the destructive power of God, which were also very difficult for me to accept. In keeping in mind this heritage, I was able to have greater empathy for my collaborators.

Revelations about ERL's sacred identity, continued to expand during his time with his followers on the island, and there were numerous stories which cited the unique and miraculous nature of ERL, and how everything that was around them gave testimony to his power. "Miracles, that's all the mission is," was what one member of the Lavaltrie group told me, "and the more someone was around the Master, the more miracles they could see"(Lavaltrie conversation with E.D. 31 July, 2014).

However, from the letters of ERL, we are very aware that life at the colony was not all fun and games. Even in the presence of God, there were still very human concerns. For one there was a great deal of distrust in the mission on the part of the local community. This would be most clearly indicated when the people of Adamsville burned the community's buildings to the ground (Info-secte 2014). Discord likewise originated from inside the community, and it would not be long before the civil authorities were called in to mediate this group of "communists" led by their "self-styled Holy Ghost"(Conway 2014: 60).

"You know the Master took these people, this big group of them, and took them from Montreal, this ice cube, and took them to a place where everything was good. The weather was good, invention good. Look at the history of that town, wherever the master went it flourished. But they were too dumb to get any of it" (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014). The migration from Adamsville, was to commence in two broad segments, the first occurring in 1923 with Mr. Bélanger. Bélanger had been a faithful member of the group since their move down from Montreal, and had donated a large amount of money to the

movement (Robitaille 2013: 363). Aided with the help of local Catholic clergy Bélanger sued the movement, accusing ERL of being a fraud. ERL was summoned to court, and fearing that he would not receive a fair trial, left for Los Angeles. (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March, 2014; St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014; Robitaille 2013: 363)

ERL continued to write many letters back to the community encouraging them to continue in the model that he had encouraged. To later followers, these letters were considered to be some of the most authoritative documents that the movement possesses. The second wave of trouble occurred in 1925 when Adelard Giasson was arrested for fraud, and was sentenced to one year in prison. (Robitaille 2013: 363) Sensing that Adamsville was no longer a suitable place to continue their movement, many of them went to California, and established a loosely connected group of houses in the area of Whittier, a suburb of Los Angeles. This is still active today; and there has been an assembly hall there since the time of ERL (Palmer 2013).

Exhausted by his experiences at Adamsville, and undoubtedly somewhat disheartened by the entire affair, ERL's time in Los Angeles was a period of physical suffering. Robitaille notes that at several occasions ERL had been temporarily blinded, and he was admitted to a hospital in August of 1924. (Robitaille, 2013:363) In December of that same year, ERL was to be involved in a car accident and on 10 January 1925, he died (Berube, 2015). His body was interred at the Evergreen cemetery, with a very unassuming tombstone, and his followers continue to visit his grave to this very day (Palmer 2013).



One of the most enduring statements that I heard, which came from a senior member of the Everett street mission, was that ERL “died of a broken heart,” and on several other occasions with my work with the Mission, I found time and time again that their commitment to help one another was an extension of this drive to repair the sins and transgressions which were committed by the first generation of believers. (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March, 2014)

## Chapter 2: The teachings of the Mission

*“The Master showed us everything, and told us about how the world really was.”*(Everett conversation with F.M. 27 July 2014)

One of the most important things to consider when reading about the vast teachings and revelatory comments made by ERL to his faithful, is that for them ERL was the fulfillment of the promise which was made by Jesus in the Gospel of John 16:13: “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, *that* shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. (KJV)”<sup>5</sup> As is implied in this verse, part of the specific vocation that the Holy Spirit was to have, was that he would reveal hidden things about the world and about reality in general. In viewing the Holy Spirit as the primary facilitator of new revelations, it offers a certain logic which explains both the breadth of his teachings’ subjects, and also places responsibility on the part of his hearers to be responsive to the new teachings that come from on high. “Everywhere the Master would go people would ask him questions about everything, and because he was God in the flesh, he would know the answers to them. There was truly nothing in the world that the Master did not have some knowledge about” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014).

ERL, as many people during his time, had a great interest in the developing natural sciences which were reaching new heights in both the scope and ability of their developments. Also, as evidenced by the many references he makes to various written works in his letters and writings, ERL had a reading interest in philosophy, literature, and history. The latter forms some of the most

unique components of Mission doctrine, in that at many occasions ERL gives answers to historical questions, and clarifies many of the misunderstandings made by academics and the historical record. On my second trip to the Everett Street mission, I was presented with a story that I feel is both representative to the type of historical correction that is found in Mission writings. “The Master said that Jesus was about six feet tall, handsome, had blonde hair and blue eyes, and radiated the beauty and love of God. The way the Catholics depict Jesus was not far off, because God wanted them to be able to have some image to look toward” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014). From the physical depiction of Jesus, to the death of Prophet Mohamed, to the real reasons behind the First World War, ERL wrote on many things, and they present themselves as a completely new way of looking at the world.

Considering that this chapter will also include many additional teachings, or more accurately systematizations, I think it is important to introduce the work of Gustav Robitaille, and the particular role that he played in developing Mission theology. Robitaille, who is known inside the movement as *Le Prince*, and of whom there is very little personal information “The heir to the kingdom divine,” was given this title in July 1922, and was told by ERL that “it will be me, through you”(Palmer 2013). Robitaille is a fascinating character, and seems to have been one of the most dynamic persons in the history of the Mission, and indeed many of the different factions of the movement can trace their heritage back to certain disagreements that were had either about the authority which was placed in Robitaille, or by his conduct as a person. “Do you know what *Le Prince* means?”

asked a member of the Everett assembly, “It is short for *le principe*,” and it signifies the importance that he would have in the spread of doctrine (Everett conversation with N.M. 9<sup>th</sup> March 2014). This title, as is very common among marginal and emergent religious tradition, is a name that reflects more than it might appear to, and moves from the mundane, to an expression of a distinct and specialized revelation. As Palmer points out, ERL had originally chosen Hector Théoret to be his successor, however due to Théoret’s chronic drinking problem, ERL turned to Robitaille. However, what ERL began to call Théoret shows the emphasis that early members of ERL placed on the honorific titles given by the Master, and Théoret went from being called *Le Prince*, to *Sous- Majesté*, *sous* also being a common word for drunk (Palmer 2013). However, after Robitaille is installed as the successor to ERL, he plays a key role in the development of Mission doctrine, and the greatest force behind the Mission’s systematic theology.

Robitaille’s gift for systematizing was not the only thing that he brought to the Mission, but he was also a gifted speaker and musician. Robitaille’s hymns, which were often set to the tunes of popular songs of his period, are the central musical components of Mission assemblies. Owing much to Irving Berlin, Richard Rogers, and Lorenz Hart, Robitaille brought the doctrines of the Mission and allowed them to be sung. Generally, only one of his songs are sung at the end of services, and accompanied by many instruments, as the St. Paul de Joliette assembly has an entire orchestra. I was curious as to why there is only one song to be sung, to which my companion replied, “I’m not sure there is a reason for

it.”(St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) Two of Robitaille’s children were selected to participate in the local symphony, and members tell this to allow for greater prestige and proof of fine musical ability.

However, before moving directly in to the theology of the movement, I feel that some mention about Robitaille’s role in the factions of the Mission would be pertinent to my discussion. Robitaille was married three times in his life, and his first marriage was to go down in flames. Palmer, who got this account from members of the Lavaltrie mission, where she spoke with several mission historians, has this account:

In December 1919, GR fell sick and went to the Master for healing. The Master told him he had caught syphilis from his wife, who was secretly an adulteress. He healed him with herbs, and GR rushed home to confront his wife ... In a rage, he kicked her – just as the doorbell rang. It was a man sent by the Master to warn him not to beat her, for she had all the papers ready to commit her husband to an insane asylum in Thetford Mines, and had the police and many powerful people on her side. The Master ordered GR to leave Quebec immediately, and GR fled at dawn to New York (Palmer 2013).

Robitaille’s second marriage, to the daughter of Mr. Haché one of the two witnesses who saw ERL being consecrated by the Virgin Mary, also came to a rather abrupt end. Robitaille accused his wife, during a Mission assembly, of committing secret abortions and working against the will of God. Palmer, who

interviewed some of the members of the St. Paul De Jolliette Mission, recorded this account:

In 1940, Le Prince arrived home early one day to find his wife in the bathroom lying unconscious in a pool of blood ... He called an ambulance ... he decided not to report her. But, since she had broken God's law, he would divorce her. He ... found out that she belonged to a network of Servant's wives in the mission. Many ... were performing secret abortions on themselves with coat hangers and injections of a bleach agent. He urged the Servants to join him in a campaign to halt this abomination, which was replacing the beauty of maternity. But they refused (because some of them were doing the same thing, having affairs, tolerating abortions, and didn't want to give it up) (Palmer & Finn, 1992).

Mr. Haché, understandably, was deeply offended by the accusations which Robitaille brought against his daughter, and founded a new Mission assembly at Lavaltrie (Palmer, 2013). Since the majority of collaborators I worked with came from the St. Paul de Jolliette group, who still hold the writings of Robitaille to be the literal work of ERL through the pen of Robitaille, this rejection of Robitaille is layered with untold supernatural significance, and it seems to have had universal consequences: "Them at Lavaltrie? Yeah, they rejected Robitaille, and they have rejected the Master. It is as simple as that. The Master said about Robitaille, "it will be me through you," and yet they want you to believe that he was the type of person who would make something up, especially something like THAT? You

would have to believe the Master was crazy, and made some kind of mistake” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2013).

As the purpose of this rather long introduction was to show the important role of Robitaille in the history of the Mission, and to give a little more background on the way that beliefs of the Mission developed, I feel that it would now be pertinent to discuss what those entail. For this rather monumental task, due primarily to the vastness of the Missions’s theological range, I will speak about the theological perspectives in a broader way, also acknowledging and pointing out divergent perspectives which arose from the various interpretations which were presented to me both in my reading, and in my discussions with members of the different halls. It is also within this section that I would like to speak somewhat to the theoretical perspective that I brought in examining the faith claims of the members of the Mission.

Folklorist Peter Rojcewicz, in his article “The ‘Men in Black’ Experience and Tradition: Analogues with the Traditional Devil Hypothesis,” makes a statement in his conclusion that is exceptionally pertinent to the understanding the orientation that members of new religious faiths, and indeed people of all faiths, have toward the texts and beliefs of their traditions: “There exists no good epistemological and ontological reasons to distinguish descriptions from explanations, if the folklorist cannot seriously entertain the possibility that a real experience lies behind traditional belief (Rojcewicz 1987:158).” I like this quote because I think it counters what has been a major flaw in the study of marginal religious movements, the presumption of the author that we are looking at people

who have been duped into believing false doctrines. Going back to the Church fathers who wrote against heresy, to the major research that took place in “cult research” back in the 1970’s, there has always been the underlying belief that the claims of these marginal religious groups are false. Utterly false, and while I do not share the beliefs of the Mission, I decided that I was not going to fall into that predicament.

I think as folklorists, our discipline encourages us to not look with contempt at our collaborators, something that I feel has plagued a lot of previous scholarship. If we assume from the beginning that there is some alternative motive or factor that lays behind the beliefs of our collaborators other than the truth of what they claim, I believe that this perspective will leech onto the written work. It is for this reason that I have included so many quotes from the believers themselves, to allow the believers voice to come through in this work, not solely because it makes for a more interesting and insightful paper, but also because it addresses a particular concern for members of my group.

For members of the Mission, the one challenge which prevents members from outside the movement from understanding and accurately portraying their vast and subtle belief system was that the world was overcome with *sarcasm* and the unwillingness to take seriously their religious beliefs and commitments. “No one who has ever written about us has ever taken the time to come out and to listen to us; and, when we go and read about what it is that we believe, I always feel shocked. “Where did they get this stuff,” I say to myself, and truly I have no idea – they lack any understanding, and it can be very sad.”(St. Paul conversation



with E. F. 28 July 2014) I sympathized greatly with the pain that this member felt, and it brought about an interior debate where I questioned the possibility of accurately speaking about the most intimate and sacred beliefs of another human being. As ethnographers, I think that we must be sensitive to the concerns of our collaborators, and I took their negative experience with previous writers to be a roadmap to how not to handle my collaborators. I listened to their concerns and the faults that they felt had been committed against them, and tried to address these in the course of my writing. Inspiration and direction came from two sources, one which was rather obvious and the other which was far more creative, but both gave me a way to wade through the waters of confusion and speak about my subject in a resonant way.

Max Beerbohm's 1897 story *The Happy Hypocrite: A Fairy Tale for Tired Men* has concealed one of the most important principles which could benefit researchers into marginalized religious groups: that through actions, be they mental or ritualized, we can approach a text, or a belief, in a new way, and perhaps "fool" ourselves just enough to speak about religious items and belief in such a way as to capture slightly the emotive quality that many groups, and this one especially, have for the religious teachings that they hold. In Beerbohm's story, a libertine falls for a very religious woman. Knowing that he must be religious to woo his lover, he pretends to be religious. The man does such a great job, that after the relationship has ended and he feels free to go about and relive his life of debauchery, he finds he cannot; the mask that he put on to fool the woman, becomes a part of him. I have always felt that religion has a similar

element, in that the more one interacts, the closer one feels to what it is that one is interacting with, a watered down form of Levy-Bruhl's *participation mystique* (Levy-Bruhl, 1912). Early anthropologists and writers are not the only ones, to have such a notion, and Richard Bradley, in his essay "The Kinematics of Belief and Desire," puts the orientation of belief "as a matter of judgment and of making up one's mind" (Bradley 2007:513).

So in an attempt to capture some of the subtlety of the teachings of the Mission, and to make sense of the various sources of divine tradition, I tried to read the documents of the movement with a sense of wonder, and to respect them as would a member of the movement. I read them early in the morning, and I followed many of the hygienic procedures which ERL encouraged in his writings. In keeping myself mindful of the importance that were attached to these writings I even found myself naturally acting in a ritualistic way toward the books, and confirming what Barbara Myerhoff had said about ritual actions: "the function of 'doing something' ritually is that it convinces the brain through actions, of the truth that is being presented (Myerhoff 1977:199). I cannot say that at any point was I taken with faith in the ideas and beliefs that I was interacting with, but I will say that by following this limited regiment of devotion, I did feel as though I had greater insight into the beliefs of the movement, and I felt that I had a greater understanding of the unique way that Mission members organize and frame their faith in the broad interaction between oral and written narratives and doctrines; and I seriously doubt that there could have been any other way that I could go about gaining this type of insight.

Furthermore, going back to what I had covered in the introduction, I also found that by speaking to the members of the community and working with Lawless's concept of "reciprocal ethnography," (Lawless 1992). Mostly this was in the form of restating, where I would repeat a particular doctrine or teaching back to the members, in a way of making sure that I had a firm grasp of the concept. I found that this was a really helpful way of assessing my own understanding of the doctrines of the movement, as well as gauge how well it was resonating with my collaborators. However, I also had access to an internal document, known as the *Questionnaire*, which played a key role in helping me understand the beliefs of the movement.

The *Questionnaire*, as a document, is organized in a remarkably similar way to the Catholic catechism. Although there is a difference in emphasis, it generally follows a hierarchical structure in which the most important topics are placed first, and then we move down to less principle topics.

The first of these topics which we are encouraged to think on is the nature and personality of God. After introducing a Trinitarian definition of God which would fit easily within the creedal statements of any number of orthodox Christian communities, the unique mystery of the Mission, finds itself mentioned in question 4, when it is revealed that there are three persons who make up the divine trinity, and one of them is Eugene Richer dit La Fleche. Robitaille in his *Temoinages* refers to ERL as being the third "hypostasis" of God, with Jesus as the second and Jehovah as the first (Robitaille, 1962). The language used in the Q, which is echoed in Robitaille's use of the term hypostasis refers to the manner

of divine manifestation. Of the three only Jesus and ERL are known to have human skin, and both of these physical incarnations are seen to relate to the mission which ERL was to articulate: Q14:” **Who was Jesus Christ?** Jesus Christ was the example of a born Child of God.” Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of what ERL wishes for the entire human race, a child born without the sin and contamination of the material world.

“When Gabriel went to Mary, what was that? Was it simply that he was going to tell her that something is going to happen? No, he was showing something about what could happen to all human kind. Jesus shows us what could happen if someone was not born with the impulses of this puny world, and that is exactly what we want to do here, to help children to be born without the corruption of the flesh”(Everett conversation with N.M. and E.S. 27 July 2014) In the way that the Mission understands and reads Biblical stories, additional layers of meaning are placed as to show how these stories relate to the explicit purpose of *consecration*, and some stories become allegorical, but many are seen to be precursors of the revelation of ERL. In particular the story about the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, this is seen to be the consecration of the Virgin’s womb by the angel to prepare her for the pure spirit which she was to receive within her womb. (Gospel of Luke: 1) ERL’s official heralding was to also include the Virgin Mary, but as has been previously presented in the stories of ERL being sickened by interaction with the Catholic Church, the faithful hold that there was always the presence of God within his body, although it is seen to have taken some time to be completely revealed: “he was God in the flesh, and always was,

now why he didn't come and shout it to the rooftops until he was ready is up to him; but I would say also that Jesus did not mention his true identity until he was thirty.”(St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014)

God, who is seen both as good and as all powerful, is likewise the creator and origin of the entire universe, but its makeup and reason for being, as seen in the cosmology of the Mission, is somewhat different from other Christian religious groups. The material world was created to hold those angels who fought with God in the first Great War in heaven, and lost, and this is the reason why we were given material bodies, to help us along in our process to rejoin with God in heaven. “There is no hell, this is hell, this is why the devil has been called “the prince of this world,” and it is his kingdom—which is hell. However, the only permanent punishment, or one could say that the worst state of being that could ever be, is to become one of those spirits who is so sinful and wicked that they cannot be incarnated, and they roam without form all of the earth. Even to be incarnated as a flea, or a tick or a rat, all of this is so much better than to be left without a body.”(St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014) Robitaille, who was mentioned in the discussion from which this quote was taken, at the St. Paul de Joliette assembly, offers the testimony of a Mr. Talbot, who went through this process, which Robitaille named “metempsychosis:” “he reports that he saw himself as many verminous beasts, such as the rat, the snake, the cockroach, and a few others I have forgotten” (Robitaille, 2013: 108). Robitaille, also records the ability that ERL had to identify the human life of certain animals, and speak about their role in their own redemption:

One evening when Mr. Talbot had just gone to bed, the Master appeared and told him: “Wilfrid, get up and go kill a big rat which is in your bathroom. It was a big scabby rat. Look.” And the Lord shows him the gnawer, scabby indeed. Mr. Talbot got up and went to his bathroom. He spotted the rat, all covered with scabs. And he killed it. I forgot to mention to you that the master also told him: “Kill it, it is a descendent of Abraham and Jacob.” There was the remnants of a posterity which was believed to be loved and blessed by the eternal (Robitaille 2013: 109).

However, although it is the case that all beings wish to be in some form of incarnation, in many cases there is a hierarchy of which souls arrive and receive which bodies; in general those higher souls are able to become incarnated into human bodies, while other less developed or demonic souls take on the form of animals, such as lice or rats. In the *Temoinages*, Robitaille offers a meditation on the rings for the mouse’s tail which serve as an introduction to Mission beliefs about the afterlife:

The rat’s tail is ringed, that is to say divided into rings or segments, which symbolize in a striking way the successive rebirths of the deceased in his posthumous metamorphoses. With caterpillars, it is the body which is divided into twelve rings, or segments, for, if I am not mistaken the caterpillar has no tail. The body of this crawling abomination thus becomes a terrifying symbol of reincarnation, in which one can catch a glimpse of the pitiful fate of the twelve tribes and twelve apostles. From the caterpillar comes the butterfly, as we saw from the twelve apostles, the

birth of legions of false postiche “saints”, false divinities and priests, archbishops, cardinals, and popes, who under the appearance of multicolored butterflies shimmering and superb, dissimulate the body of a repulsive work of a cloacal reptile. From the twelve tribes of Jacob we also saw appear legions of billionaires, dressed in ermine and jewels, but hiding perverse sub-layers and crapulous ambitions (Robitaille 2013: 85).

The following quote, which has been cited as the basis for the mistaken belief that members of the Mission believe that hell is in being incarnated as a butterfly (Palmer 1992).

The Mission, and the principle behind “rejuvenating the world through *Eugeneisme* (see Chapter 3),” therefore is to prepare the body of women to receive these higher souls. (St. Paul conversation with G.B. and E.F. 3 August 2014) “We keep our women calm during childbirth, so that they will be able to open themselves to souls of higher and higher caliber, and this will restore both body, soul and spirit (St. Paul conversation with E.F. and G.B. 3 August 2014). Although I will spend a chapter devoted to some of the gendered elements of Mission theology, some introduction to beliefs about pregnancy are essential being that they are so great a part of Mission reasoning, and will be discussed in a latter chapter. “You have read the Testimonies, this is the mission that was revealed to ERL, and even before that which was told to him by Jesus” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014).

The story which was being referenced in the statement was an account which Robitaille records about Jesus coming and speaking to ERL, at his

apartment on Hotel De Ville Street, and I must confess this is one of my personal favorite stories from the movement:

One evening as He was preparing to take a very frugal meal, prepared by himself, there was a knock at the door. The master opens. The distinguished visitor was none other than Jesus Christ himself. The master confessed having been a little shy because the place was not clean. Being alone, constrained to work for a living, his majesty had not the time to tend to the household duties, which are rather devolved to the woman. But, there was no woman to serve the Lord. Therefore the place was dirty. Nevertheless, the Master invited Christ for supper. Jesus answered: "Clean up the place well, and I will come again with my mother." Upon that, the first consecrated one disappeared. What a magnificent lesson! The whole of the divine Master's mission was comprised in these words: "clean up the place where the Lord must inhabit. Cast out the vendors of the temple, the liars, the filthiness. Once the job is done, well! The Consecrated ones will come and reside there with their mother (Robitaille 2013: 67).

I have used this story as a launch pad to introduce a central interpretative factor that must be considered especially in the light of the forthcoming section on the cosmology of the Mission. Although there are many people who listen and believe with great conviction that the stories and the doctrines of the movement are literally and spiritually true, there are others within the movement who



understand the doctrine and the stories with a more allegorical interpretation, and both are a very present reality in the spiritual doctrines of the movement. “Everything is on a spectrum, nothing is absolutely one way or the other, and this is the same way with the teachings. There are some members who believe that they are literal and binding, and there are some who believe them more in the sense that they reveal something about the actual makeup of the universe.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) Although I cannot with any certainty say which theological perspective is the more prominent within the movement, my fieldwork sought very hard to include both perspectives, perhaps leaning more so on the more figurative interpretations of doctrine. In the previously mentioned story, I have heard the interpretation range from, this is proof that at any time we may be visited by the actual presence of God, and we must always be ready, to, this is a vision which may be seen to confirm the mission of ERL and both are perfectly valid (St. Paul & Everett, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Using the previous story as an example to show the great diversity of opinions and interpretations which exist in Mission theology and practice, I would like readers to remember the interplay that exists between the allegorical and the literal as we examine how the world is said to exist in Mission cosmology. Although the cosmic makeup which is taught by members of the various Mission assemblies is greatly different from that which is taught from Western scientific models, the degree of literalness which these doctrines are held greatly differ from individual to individual, with some people accepting completely that the world is actually organized in the way that is described in the doctrines of the

movement, and others seeing the material universe to be overcome with spiritual significance and meaning. In the same way that there is a wide spectrum among Abrahamic religions about the literalness of the six days of creation for instance.

However, I would like to point out that members of the Mission, were not the only period movement, to hold vastly different speculative models of the universe. In 1922 Cyrus Teed, called by his followers Koresh, produced a work called *The Cellular Cosmogony: or the earth a concave sphere* (Teed 1922). In it, he laid out for his followers an alternative layout of the physical universe in which space as we understand it was not outside of the earth, but was rather inside it. He taught that the material world, was formed around the vastness of space, and it was optical illusions which caused others to believe that the heavens and other planets were above them. As a contemporary of ERL, albeit someone writing in English, I think this is interesting because it points to the fact that alternative cosmologies were a very present element in the literature coming from the ideological fringe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and I believe offers some context to set the beliefs which ERL proposed (Garwood 2008).

Like the Koreshans, although it is very doubtful ERL would have ever read any of their literature, ERL was unconvinced of the vastness of space, and at certain points seems to be very unconvinced of there being other planets.

The Master revealed to us that the entire zodiac, despite its picturesque drawings, was nothing but an optical illusion, and that the constellations were nothing but the reflection of necropolis, of cemeteries of dead bodies finally, who wanted to shine on this earth during their somber existence,

and now crawl in the mire of sepulchers. The gold of stars is nothing but slime, mud, insect dung it is nothing but the cadaveric dissolution of the vainglorious proud, who vainly thought they were heavenly bodies, geniuses, shining stars, when all the while they were nothing but worms dressed up as butterflies, the atropos (*sic*) being one of the species amongst others (Robitaille 2013: 299).

Using this text as an introduction to the ideas that the movement has about the makeup of the universe, it is not difficult to see how this passage could be taken to be both metaphorical and literal. We find an incredibly rich language of universal pessimism that seems to point to the inability of man to move beyond the failings of their own worlds. Directly above this quote, Robitaille introduces the text with a very long statement about how men look to the heavens instead of focusing on the problems that present themselves right here upon the earth, which in some senses reads like a moral indictment against those who would rather travel elsewhere than improve their life now. In fact, since this was in a period where space travel was still seen to be a very distant possibility, the sentiments echoed here were not unlike many other religious leaders who warned against wanting to travel elsewhere, when there was so much to be done here and now.

Strictly allegorical interpretations seem to break down, when further in this same text Robitaille makes the following statement: “No one will ever go to the planets, because the planets exist only in the vainglorious dreams of the ambitious, in the darkened eyes of the globe producers and their fictitious lens,

their lying telescopes” (Robitaille 2013:300). Robitaille, further goes on to identify astronomy as being identical to religion- from context, those false beliefs which exist outside the revelation of ERL- and says: “Astronomy is the sister to religion. Moreover, they were born at the same time. They are two treacherous twins, two liars!” (Robitaille 2013: 300).

It is interesting that in one of the first conversations which I was to have with some of the members of the movement, the topic of cosmology was to be one of the first things discussed. I had a great sample, with one of my sources being someone who leaned greatly toward the literal interpretation of the movement, and the other as someone who saw the teachings as being metaphorical. In seeing how both of these people were fairly prominent within their own assembly halls, and since there is a relatively free allowance of opinion, I found this negotiation of belief to be quite interesting. Also, while the conversations which I am including happen to come from different halls, it should be noted that among the Everett and St. Paul assemblies, I found there to be interior differences in the interpretation of dogma.

DJR: So what do you guys believe about the solar system, or other planets?

Lavaltrie: Other planets? Well we accept what our Master told us about them, that they don’t exist, but they are like figments or illusions.

DJR: So there is only this planet? Earth?

Lavaltrie: Yes, there is only this planet, and everything else this was created to deceive us. This earth belongs to the devil, and it was he who

controls it, and all of those beliefs which go against what our Master taught us, I think you know where they come from. From the devil. We are the only ones to teach the truth. (Lavaltrie conversation with E.D .iii 17<sup>th</sup> September 2014)

However, as I have previously alluded to, I have had conversations with Mission members who hold very strongly to more traditional understandings of the universe. “You can’t tell me that when I look through my cheap little telescope that I am not seeing other planets. I mean that is very clear. When you look at the pictures that came down from space, or from the Apollo missions, it seems to me that there is something that is out there. I am also not saying that what the Master said is untrue by any means, but it just seems to me like he meant something more by what he was saying, could be symbolic or something” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014).

In addition to teaching that the world was alone in the entire universe, ERL had a unique and puzzling view of the structure of the world, seeming at some points to indicate that it was flat. Although this seems to be somewhat of a taboo subject to discuss with outsiders, when I was reading in the testimonies of Robitaille, I came across a passage which seems to indicate that the world is flat and is considerably more expansive than is currently depicted.

The Russians on the other side, tried to cross the North Pole, a certain aviator by the name of Nobile left with his companions. They were never seen again, Not one word from his Majesty the Master, that is to say our Lord Eugene Richer dit La Fleche, ever lied or deviated, even in the

conjectures where appearances seemed improbable. “Although the revealer” would add, “it is regrettable. Because there exists a very advanced civilization beyond the pole. You would be astonished to find your cars there. Furthermore the climate is ideal. But no one would be able to get there; because the barriers of cold and ice will prevent all attempts; and the adventurers who would dare try will perish before reaching their destination.” And indeed every time some daring adventurers attempted such a far reaching flight, they never did return. Having asked the Lord if he himself had not thought of going there; “what of it!,” he answered. “I would not be received any better than I am here” (Robitaille 2013: 298).

When I brought it up, and asked some of my collaborators within the movement, I was told; “Well I don’t know exactly how the world is shaped, the Master did not explain that to us, but however it has to be it is exactly the way that our Master intended it to be. But I will say this in warning that there are many things which are sent to deceive people, and I don’t want you to be one of those who throw their lot in with Satan. Even the sun is sent to deceive us” (Everett conversation with F.M. 27 July 2014). As this conversation took place earlier on in my research and familiarity with the group, I was not aware of the way in which members of the movement see and explain the sun and the moon, and how it recasts all of their convictions about the world. Before ahead with a further understanding of their conceptions of the material world, I wanted to address the way that members of the movement come to see the shape and makeup of the world. To address one of the more sensational claims which the

media has claimed, members do not accept that the world is a perfect sphere, but rather is pear-shaped (St.Paul conversation with G.B. and E.F. 3 August 2014). However, to see the way that members conceptualize this it is only for the bottom part of the pear, not a larger and smaller section.

In reading some of the scant scholarship that has been paid to this group before, I came across many references which claimed that for members of the movement, the sun and its light, are reflections of hell. In attempting to clarify this assertion, I was to encounter one of the signature doctrines of the movement. From Robitaille's *Temoinages*: "According to the Revealer, the sun is the reflection of the pool of fire situated under the earth. Its light is nothing but a flamboyant lie, just like the theology and papal infallibility. Isaiah calls the sun Lucifer. And that is its real name. even though it resides in the abyss of the sarcophagus fire, its devouring flames, its calcinating heat emanate from Hell itself"(Robitaille 2013).

Like the moon, which will be discussed more fully in the chapter devoted to motherhood, is an image of motherhood, so also, is the sun seen to be a symbol of the false light which comes from the Catholic Church. It is thus seen to be both a symbolic and literal indictment against the teachings of Catholicism. Robitaille further discusses this issue in the *Questionnaire*, as he writes:

180

***What does the word "sun" mean?***

This word comes from "sol" which means BASE, foundation, heel, foot; it also has a certain affinity with "solus" which means: alone, solitary.

181

***That's impossible, because the sun is above in the highest constellation, therefore it cannot be the base, the foundation which is supposed to be down below.***

The sun is not above, but below; it is the foundation of all our planetary system. It is the fire of hell that reflects hypocritically in space.

182

***Is the sun truly a star or a symbol ?***

It is but a vain symbol, a burning reflection.

183

***Who does it symbolize or represent ?***

The pope, the sun of this earth, who does not enlighten, but burns, and furthermore, transgresses the divine law, does not marry, and remains celibate, that is to say alone, solitary, as his symbol above (Robitaille 1962).

As the doctrine of the sun has shown us, the distinctions which members of the Mission desire to occur between themselves and the Catholic heritage that many of them share is one of the most fundamental aspects of their theological orientation. Almost all of Mission doctrine is set within the context of opposing traditional catholic understandings of religion, and the beliefs of the Catholic Church become the sounding board that members of the Mission rail against in their formation of doctrine. “The Catholic church is the biggest evil which has ever been allowed to perpetuate,” one member said to me, “it is an evil which has been going strong for a very long time, and if any one doubts that this earth is the realm of the devil, let them consider those so-called godly Catholics.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014) Considering that the Catholic Church is such a large portion of the theology of the Mission, I think we must consider the role that the Catholic Church plays in Mission belief.



Throughout *Les Documents*, the antipathy that members of the Mission have with the Roman Catholic Church is one of the most enduring elements in the writings. In one of the interviews I conducted with one of the senior members of the Mission, I asked the question as to why there were not more original followers of ERL? “You see the people in the province were Catholic, and the word of the Pope was very important to them. After Israel came back from Rome, even he was swayed, and after the Pope refused to hear of the truth (ERL’s Incarnation), he left the faith. This goes to show you the power that the Roman Church had over the people, and part of what ERL wanted to do was to liberate us from the tyrannical control of the church.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014) The Catholic Church, as I have understood Mission doctrine, is the quintessential example of spiritual pride and haughtiness, refusing to hear or see anything that does not neatly fit in with their expectations of spiritual pride. In one of the first experiences I had with the exegetical practice of the Mission, was the association that Matthew 23:13 had with the dominance of the Catholic Church: “But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”

Considering the great role that the Mission places on oral stories about ERL, there are a plethora to be chosen which express the deep distrust and confusion that Mission members have toward the Catholic Church. If it could be essentialized to a single point, it would be that for many early associates of ERL’s mission, they often let their denominational allegiance blind them to the miracles that they were witnessing. Robitaille recounts the story of Mrs. Lessard, who had encountered the

teachings of the Mission in Ottawa where she had fled with a lover. She asked ERL for consecration, and he informed her that she needed first to be reconciled with her husband, she was moved and proceeded to do as she was instructed. However, she and her husband had fallen away, and M. Gustav Robitaille addresses the role that the Catholic Church had in their apostasy:

Mrs. Lessard went back to Montreal, reconciled with her husband and they were both consecrated. But unfortunately, when the master ceased to be involved with the Catholic Church, they ceased to frequent the Mission. It goes to show you that the most touching prodigies and revelations are not sufficient enough to convince even the most privileged (Robitaille, 1962: 72).

Furthermore, as M. Gustav Robitaille illustrates in the *Temoignages*, ERL was never a member of the Catholic Church, and recalls that as a child, some well-intentioned woman, who was healed by holding ERL as an infant, tried to place around his neck a scapular. As she did this, the young child turned blue and started to behave as though he was being choked, and it was the scapular which was the cause of his being strangulated (Robitaille, 1962:49). The conclusion that was to be drawn from this is that the Master was showing as an infant the falsity and corruption of “the Church of Satan.”

In one of Robitaille’s conversations with Spénard, a man who had some early interest in the Mission, Robitaille explains the creedal statement, “and he descended into hell,” in light of ERL’s emergence from Catholicism:

“I demonstrated to him in an explicit way that if the Divine Comforter was constrained to go to church, I was but to accomplish the promise that he made in olden times, that on the third day he would descend into hell. “ Mr. Spénard, the Master descended into hell of which the main offices are the churches. His great generosity has come to save us by taking us out of there. Moreover, is it not written in the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) that he would take some out of the synagogue of Satan, to build his kingdom? Well the synagogue of Satan, that is the Church, do you understand?” (Robitaille, 1962:46).

The antipathy that many emergent religious groups have toward their historical heritages is not at all uncommon, as there is extreme pressure on emergent groups to make themselves distinct. For example in the third chapter of Galatians, Paul ferociously reacts to Christians who would require fidelity to Jewish customs, namely circumcision, and the effect was to solidify the theological differences between the emergent Christian tradition, from its Jewish roots. In a similar manner, the new revelations brought about through the incarnation of ERL required a dismantling of the established religious order, which is still seen to be the primary reason that greater knowledge of the movement has not occurred.

Also like Paul’s doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Christ, members of the Mission tend to see the fact of ERL’s being born in the Catholic Church as being symbolic of a similar redemption through experience. ERL in being born into the church provided a way for it to be completed in his ministry, but when it rejected him it sealed its own destruction, and its place against the will

of God. “He knew the words of the church, the language it used, but they rejected him” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014). The similarity between ERL’s being rejected by the church, and Jesus’ rejection by the Jewish religious authorities is easy to see, and this similarity has become one of the key elements in how Missions narratives understand ERL’s mission and birth. ERL, as a condition of being born into an earthly context had certain cultural assumptions and traditions, but it is always stressed that although he participated in several of these, he did so out of cultural assumptions, and never because he believed in these conventions. Robitaille in his questionnaire, states: **So why did the master allow a Catholic priest to perform his marriage ceremony?** For the civil act, just as Christ went to the temple so as not to incur the wrath of the contemporary religious authorities, the priests and Pharisees. Being God, he possessed omnipotence, he did not need any puppet to unite him with a woman; but in order to avoid scandal and persecution by these beasts in human form, he humbled himself to permit this (Robitaille 1962 Q:197).”

The most radical assertion that Robitaille makes about the Catholic Church is he identifies it with the sun, a very negative thing in Mission theology. The sun is the apex of the twisted universe in which we all live, and Robitaille draws the comparison between it, and the false spiritual light that is emitted by the Catholic Church:

"The sun, under the pretext of warming the earth, said His Majesty, devours it tacitly. Its fire gnaws and eats away at the earthly machine, and if it were not for the innumerable ores and minerals and other inflammable elements

of which the earth's interior is filled, our planet would have been shattered a long time ago by some telluric upheaval, some cataclysmic overthrow or similar uproar. What delays this collapse, this explosion, are the immense incombustible riches with which the hand of the Creator has filled the interior of our planet, the only one existing in the Luciferian bosom." Therefore, according to the Revealer, the sun, or Satan, all the while pretending to warm the earth, devours and consumes it. The pope, his alter-ego, his terrestrial representative, his vicar and not Christ's, under the pretext of enlightening souls, of guiding them towards salvation, towards the Light, robs, taxes, strips and renders them mercilessly to the Moloch of war and to the hot coals of gehenna. Both of them, the pope and the sun, two personifications of Lucibel, respect Satan's day, Sunday, day of the sun (Everett 18 March 2015: email from Mission member.)

As many of these examples indicate, Catholic theology was a strong element in the development of Mission doctrine, and the church itself has come to represent the original disobedience against God. As Satan rejected God for the purposes of exalting his own self, so also has the Catholic Church, they rejected God when he came to them, and for this they have aligned themselves with the Devil and have become an integral part of his world. The historical strength and presence of the Catholic Church, has become for Mission members, proof of the infernal nature of the Church, and its alignment with Satan.

### Chapter 3

*We are the only religion on earth to treat our women like we do, they are queens and we treat them as such, they are what it is all about.* (St. Paul conversation with M.M. 1 August 2014)

This chapter looks at the performance of gender in Mission ritual and theology. Gender is exceptionally important, because it deals with motherhood, and the family, both of which are considered to be the corner-stone of Mission social and religious theory. As the role of the mother is so central, more so than with any other group that I have ever worked with, I feel that it is a requirement to discuss gender within this context, and the function that it plays in Mission society.

When I first came into work with the mission, I was overcome with the amount of references which were constantly made toward the womb. As someone who has spent a great deal of time working on religious variance, I am quite used to hearing about theological beliefs which are “out-of-the-ordinary,” but I have to admit that the extensive use of anatomical language was quite a shock. However, it was not until my mother, Wanda Fay Rose, was speaking to one of the women of the movement that it dawned on me, the extensive importance that gender plays in the theoretical makeup of the ideas of the Mission. As this was my introduction to the importance of gender, I have decided to include the entirety of the conversation:

St. Paul: Did you expect to have children?

WFR: No! Are you kidding? Not at 44, I was half dead before he was born.

St. Paul: Master has told us that we should have our children young, that we should not wait, children this is all that we women are here for.

(WFR smiles)

It is for this reason that we are the ones who were chosen to bring forth the fruit of the womb, and I feel very sorry for any woman who has not had this miracle. All children are a blessing. Don't you think that he (The Author) was a blessing?

WFR: Was he a blessing? O yeah, I think of him as a blessing, he really is.

St. Paul: See! Children, family, that's everything (St. Paul conversation with F.M. 1 August 2014).

Although in the very limited information that I was aware of which dealt with Mission doctrine, the role of women was something discussed from the very beginning; however, it was not until this moment that I grew acutely aware of the role that gender plays in the theoretical conception of their movement, and I think it is one of the most fascinating and problematic aspects of Mission theology. In this chapter, I will present the beliefs which I had access to which dealt with MES ideas about the role of women, and the importance of motherhood.

I would like to say from the very beginning, that gender is solidly defined and regulated within community life within MES; and I do not feel for one

moment that either the men of the community, nor the women would feel as though they are in a repressive environment. So I believe, when I was told by one member that the Mission treats their women like queens, I believe that from his perspective he is doing just that. However, having a religion that places such an intense responsibility upon the woman as the bearer of children it would be difficult to ignore the connotations that go along with this responsibility.

Women are objects of extreme veneration, because they bear children, and without them childbirth and the mission of Mission De L'Ésprit Saint would be pointless; however, along with the veneration and appreciation that ERL has for women, there is also a deep fear and resentment. They are the bringers of souls to the world, and yet they are also the way that additional souls become encased in this world, the devil's dominion. It is undoubted, that much of this comes from a literal, and historically common, reading of the accounts of Genesis, where Eve is punished by God for eating of the tree of good and evil, and is cursed:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field. Genesis 3:16-18



Although, members of the Mission do not take these words to be literal, indeed they are far from fundamentalist in their interpretation of scripture, the implications of this are incredibly clear: women are continuants of this cursed condition, and there is much that needs to be done to reverse this effects.

I think that it is very clear that both Robitaille and ERL had extensive problems with women. When one looks at the claims that were made by Robitaille against his ex-wives, accusing them of secret abortions and adultery, this harkens back to a conception of women that is of an ultra-traditional understanding (Palmer 2013). However, even the female body, the vessel which holds the body of a future soul, is spoken of by ERL in a condemned language, using Levitical language, the female body is “unclean,” and this is particularly true for items relating to childbirth.

All of these points show a very peculiar repulsion and attraction to the idea of the woman, who is both nurturer and bringer of sorrow. In short, what I feel is most present in the ideas about members of the Mission, is that they uphold a strongly traditionalized view of the role of the woman, and of the nature of what it means to be a woman. This is a natural thing, and there is a strong reliance on traditional biological language, to show that there is an obvious and observable natural order to the universe, and the biological capability of women to bring forth children, also adds ethical justification for the strict gender interpretations which are insisted upon by members of the Mission.

Members of the Mission, place responsibility upon their women to conform to certain patterns which have been naturally ordained and have been

passed down through history. Judith Butler elucidates the work of Simone De Beauvoir thus:

When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender as the cultural interpretation or signification of this facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity that has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman’ to induce a body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself to an historically delineated possibility, and to do this as a sustained and corporeal project (Butler 1992:522).

With this insight from Butler, we might conceive that the way that women within the Mission present themselves, the way that they perform their gender gives us a look into the larger ideological framework that women are required to fill within the Mission. With that let us move further into Mission doctrine.

As has been mentioned several times over the course of this work, the mission which ERL was to give to the world, was that through the blessing of the wombs of women, all imperfections of body and soul could be completely obliterated. To quote from the sign over the door of the St. Paul de Joliette assembly: “To redeem the world through eugenics.”

I would like to make it implicitly clear that what is meant by eugenics in the use by members of the Mission is emphatically different from the way that

this term is commonly meant. The connotations that this term brings up, the Holocaust, forced sterilization, racial-cleansing, are not what is being taught by members of the Mission, and is absolutely against every guiding principle that the movement holds dear. What this means for members of the Mission is simply, the gradual improvement of human beings over time through the use of prayers. Implicit with their aims of healing the world through the blessing of the wombs of expectant mothers, early on in Mission history, the term seemed to imply all that they desired to do for humankind. They wanted to ensure health, both spiritual and material, for the children that were going to be born, and that successive generations would benefit from their blessing. This gradual improvement over time, and to stop problems of evil and disease in the womb, was seen to be similar to the aims of eugenics, and the followers then adopted the name. I also think that the similarity between *L'Eugénisme* and ERL's first name were too great to be ignored, and the movement kept the term.

The idea of blessing the wombs of expectant mothers had long been a fascination for ERL and for his brother Israel, and according to the information provided by Berube this was the first intention of the original prayer group, and the main reason that Israel was to go to Rome, to create an order to work for this end. It is also clear, as from several of the quotes which are on the St. Paul website, that the group, which as has been shown time and time again, has an eclectic approach to developing its theology, there were many exterior authors who were cited as having similar beliefs to ERL. "You have been on the website right? Did you see all of those quotes? Now these were not anybody, who could

say anything, these were people of the highest intellect. What did they say over and over again – it is by the womb that the character of the child is made, and this is what we have to proclaim here” (St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014) .

From Ezekiel to Voltaire, each one of the quotes on the St. Paul website reiterates that the essence and the personality of the person is based on the experience and input of the mother, and this extends beyond basic genetics, and extends to the person’s own soul. To take a quote from the website attributed to Aldous Huxley, “Give me good mothers, and I will give you a good world.” This attribution of all moral and spiritual possibilities to the mother is one of the most unique aspects of Mission doctrine, and one that I feel has added to the stigma that has been applied to the community.

Considering the distinctness of this particular doctrine, I must admit that I was taken aback on more than one occasion while reading through the documents. In particular, as I have mentioned in a previous statement, I was very surprised to find such explicit anatomical information provided through the course of reading the documents, and to find over and over again reference after reference to the womb, and to “birth-water;” so the very first order of business which I assigned for myself was to get to the heart of what was intended in this language.

I think that it is a very common thing as we look at the language of religion, and in particular those marginalized religious groups, to find language which comes about through an orientation to certain areas of the human body.

When evangelical Christians speak of knowing Christ through the heart, the physical component is simply a catalyst through which the emotion of religious experience is expressed. So, as I was looking at this movement I wanted to know whether or not there was going to be a similar association that members had with the womb. To be more direct, could it be that the womb has taken the same place as the heart in the dialogue of the Mission?

The answer to this question, as I was going to find out, was not going to be so simple as to just be a misdirection of nuance, but was in fact a point of introduction to a very broad and complicated conception of the afterlife, and of the makeup of the universe, one which had been greatly overlooked by other researchers, to the irritation of the community. “They (researchers) do not have any tact in writing about what we think. Journalist and the like, make us out to be crazy, and this is how they sell their books. No one wants to listen to us, and as a result they can’t understand what it is that we believe.” (St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014)

As this was one of the earlier questions which I was going to have in conversation with members of the community, I had to reiterate my commitment to capture an emic perspective, and during these moments had to seriously temper the conceptions which I had about the nature and reality of pregnancy. I felt like at that moment, my collaborator was giving me a window in which I might see some of the transgressions of the past, and allow in my work to overcome some of these issues; I took his advice, and craned my neck to attempt to garner what it is that others had missed.

As with everything else in Mission theology, the Master would be the one “to lead them into all truths,” and as this regards the concept of motherhood, it begins with an understanding of the soul. How Mission doctrine understands humanity is essential to how it understands motherhood, and it begins with Lucifer’s fall from Heaven. As has been cited in Chapter 2, members of the community understand the human soul to have its origins in the expulsion of the devil and his angels out of heaven. Our incarnation on this planet is the result and punishment of our original disobedience, and we suffer through incarnation after incarnation until the end of time. (St. Paul conversations with G.B., E.F., and M.M., 3 August 2014) This explanation of the origin of our fallen nature also provides an explanation for why it is that there is so much suffering in the world, and explains people’s natural tendency toward sin. In addition to this origin of people’s tendency toward sin, there is also the belief in that souls are forever searching to be incarnated, to find a home in a body. “Souls were made for a body, and this is why after death, the very most important thing for a soul to do is to find a body, and they will stop at nothing to do this. It is an unnatural state for a soul to be without a body, and it is a period of great suffering... In fact, the only absolute hell is for a soul that is so evil that it cannot be incarnated. This is the only absolute hell.” (St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014) However, according to Mission doctrine some souls are more evolved than other souls: “Life is not black or white, you know, it is a spectrum. And, just like you have some people who are more kind, or calm, or whatever, you also have people who are meaner; what we do here is to try to prepare a woman to receive the kind of souls that have this higher nature, and we do this by keeping them calm during

their pregnancy, and by blessing their wombs.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014)

Even the material world has given a testimony of the great power that exists in the office of the mother, and as Robitaille records, the moon itself is a symbol of this reality, and after recounting an occurrence when ERL appeared within the moon, here offers this interpretation:

There is an important moral to retain from this spectacle (the phases of the moon), for the moon is the mirror of maternity with its characteristic phases, the conception or first quarter, the plentitude or pregnancy and the decline corresponding to the partition and its sequels. The mother’s womb is a train, a carriage which vehiculates (sic) souls from nothingness to existence. Up until the Master, except for Jesus, call the travelers, who have taken the maternal train, have been children of Satan, born from cults, en (sic) route towards the grave. They came out of a nothingness to direct themselves towards another nothingness. This nothingness however is prickled with tortures and grieved. By appearing in the moon the Master wanted to demonstrate that the time has come where the mother can vehiculates the Lord in her Womb, instead of demons that she bears in her entrails for the rottenness of the graves” (Robitaille 2013: 203).

In Mission understanding, there is the belief that souls attend to mothers based on frequencies, meaning that women who are miserable or sad during their pregnancy will likewise attract miserable souls, and those who are calm will attract calm souls. “It is like this, you (a member addressing my mother) said that

you liked to read to him, when he was in the womb. Didn't you? (WFR agrees)

Well, is that not obvious? You got a child to respond to what you were feeling at the time. You liked to read, and now he likes to read." (St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014)

It is for this reason that pregnant women of the community, often do not leave their homes during the last weeks of pregnancy, and even Sunday morning assembly is broadcast through close-circuit television. "We don't want our women to be stressed out over anything. So as a general rule, we don't want them working, and especially as they get further along in pregnancy we try to make sure that they don't have to leave their houses. So we designed this system (closed-circuit television) so that they wouldn't have to." (St. Paul, conversation with G.B. and E.F., 3 August 2014)

For members of the movement, there are practical and visible results to the practice that they hold; "You know when you pointed out how well behaved the children were, well this is a result of what it is that we do here." (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 3 August 2014)

Indeed, the children of the movement through all of my visit were incredibly well behaved, and I remarked on more than one occasion on this fact. The good behavior of the children was the beginning of a larger conversation about the observable benefits which occur as a result of this spiritual exercise. However, as I was listening to the spiritual explanations of this movement, I felt the compulsion to ask why was the need to continue to use the term eugenics, if this was a spiritual process? The answer that I was to receive also tells something about how members of the movement see the relationship between body and soul. "As we attract those higher souls we are



making everything about our world better. Not only because of the good souls that have been born here, but also because there is a physical result of this, and both body and soul. Thus if you say that it is only spiritual you are ignoring the physical results, and if you say that it is only physical then you ignore the spiritual. Both are important. Both are what the Master intended when he said that he was to redeem the world.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. and E.F. 3 August 2014)

Thus, I think it is a natural reaction to have when we read the term eugenics to be somewhat taken aback, because it is a scary term, which has had a very long history of very bad things. However, to allow our investigations to stop there, and to not look further into the issues and beliefs associated with this term, I feel that it is really irresponsible. Eugenics simply does not mean for the members what it means for the rest of us, and we have to realize that. I did however wonder if the movement had developed in a post-World War II world, whether they would continue to use that term.

As we continued this conversation, it revolved back to a previous discussion that I had about the age of some of the members when they got married. Although I found every marriage to be completely legal, in every sense, according to Canadian law, and I also could observe no outward signs of anything other than complete willingness to participate in the marriage process, I did find it rather surprising that many of the couples decided to become married in their later teens, which is very uncommon in the world that I grew up in. The answer was attributed to the spiritual effectiveness of Mission theology: “When you have

good souls entering into good bodies, which have been purified from all sin, then you find that people are more mature, and are able to get married earlier. I mean there are some people here, who got married when they were younger, on paper, but their souls were completely prepared for it by the way that they were brought up.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) With such a strong emphasis that was placed upon traditional marriage arrangements, I was very surprised at some of the open-mindedness that they had to certain sexual preferences, in particular I asked whether or not it was acceptable for members of the community to be gay, and received a very open and positive response; “Yeah, I think that there are probably some of the younger people at the hall who are gay, and we always accept them. Why this is, I don’t know, but I also know that no one chooses to be gay; so we just accept them. I have heard people say that this could be to previous lives. I guess if you had been a woman for quite a few generations, and then all of a sudden, you now have a male body, it might take some time for you to adjust to it” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 28 July 2014).

However, I did feel that there is a strong emphasis on women to perform in ways that are stereotypically geared toward preserving traditional roles. To take Judith Butler’s concept of “the performance of gender as compulsory,” there is a very strong emphasis on those women who can easily be seen to fit within traditional ideas about the keeping of the home, and bearing children (Butler 1999). Also language as it relates to women on an almost universal scale is geared toward the passive.

For instance in the discussions about the womb, it seems as though this area is a place of complete passivity, and without the blessing which is given by the serviteur, anything could happen. This implies that the womb is a complete entity, alone, and susceptible to anything which it might come in contact with, be it good or evil; and there is a continuous worry about putting people in situations where the womb might be compromised. Thus women are sequestered, and kept alone with the intent of protecting them. “We are the only religion on earth to treat our women like we do, they are queens and we treat them as such, they are what it is all about” (St. Paul conversation with M.M. 1 August 2014). I had a very mixed reaction to being told this, and I can remember how awkward it was for me to just to continue to smile and nod. I think that anyone who has had any background in feminist theory could quickly see the difficulty in this phrasing. If someone can treat you like a queen, then they also have power over you. The queen is a source of tremendous representative power, but is confined in daily life by her male entourage. The role that men play in the bearing of children seems to be almost completely nill, as far as bearing any part of the spiritual responsibility for the souls of his children, but he is seen to be the provider for the home, and the general overseer. In the meals which follow the Sunday morning assemblies, the work of the kitchen is performed exclusively by women, both in the preparing, serving, and in the collecting of dishes and washing, as men are allowed to sit in the main part of the cafeteria and talk, and put back chairs and tables. The only obligation that I did see that was required of a man during the reproductive period was that he was to abstain from alcohol (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 28 July 2015).

With such a great deal of emphasis placed upon the role of motherhood, and on the bearing of “children of the good will”, a reference found in the writings of ERL to refer to those pure souls who were made immune from the troubles of the world. One of the most easily accessible, and gendered expectations of the community, is that women are expected to be mothers, and this is the very central focus for the life of the female members of the community. To go back to the interaction that my mother had with a member of the movement, it became clearer and clearer the expectations that this woman had for a woman’s role. “The Master told us we should have our children young,” and on more than one occasion I heard people make reference to the commandment given to Adam and Eve in the garden, “Be fruitful and multiply.” ERL himself, throughout his letters encourages his followers to produce many children of the good-will, and in the discussions that I had with many of the members, it was very common for the average family to have more than eight children.

Within the Mission, as with the Quiverfull movement, a type of hyper-traditional populist evangelicalism, there is a centralization of divine authority over the birth of children, where man and wife submit themselves over to God’s will, and determine that child bearing is the will of God (Biggar and Melbye 1997). Thus, although I was not aware of any portion of the writings in which ERL expressly forbade the use of birth control, when I spoke to several men in the community, it seemed to them that the use of birth control seemed to contradict the will of God for their lives, and as a result they did not use it. I think that perhaps the opinion of the women within the movement might have been

different, but I was unable to ask. The few sporadic interactions that I was able to have with community women, were so short that I was not able to pursue any topic in detail, and the largest interaction with a woman which I was able to observe was my mother's conversation with another woman.

As has been mentioned earlier, there is a specific blessing that is used for the preparation of the womb to receive a pure child, although this is done after conception. I think this refers to Mission belief that a soul enters the material body, and is not born with a body. In these services, the pregnant woman, goes up to the serviteur in front of the congregation, and asks for the blessing of her womb. The serviteur then lays his hand upon the woman's head and says the following prayer:

I, by the spirit of the Eternal, and by the power which was given to my flesh, in which dwells his holy name, the Holy Spirit, I bless your insides (entrailles). Let us unite, my daughter in the body of the Spirit of life; and be the channel, by which the spirit of life might establish his home in you, offer yourself in the spirit of truth and sincerity, **EAT YOUR DAILY BREAD TO RECOVER THE LIFE WHICH IS WITHN YOU** at this moment for all the fruits of your insides.

This life, which lives in the eternal power can reign here below at this moment and can communicate with our Father, the true God for all eternity. O sovereign Father, by your all power, and by the ministry which you have given unto me in my body, give the world dominion over the flesh, allow yourself to live in this member who is a part of your body, the

body of the Holy Spirit, at this moment and for all eternity! Our father who is in heaven by your holy name, be honored in the body of all of your members, so that your name would reign in your children, which are subject to Your Holy Spirit, and will be participants in your good will, so that your will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.

(Communion)

By this bread and by this drink that we take, we form in spirit and in truth an alliance between the flesh and the Holy Spirit for life eternal, on earth as it is in heaven. (Berube 2015)

This prayer, which might seem quite strange to someone outside the movement, as it did for me, is the central gift that the movement wishes to accomplish for all of the world. This was what was intended by ERL and it was his legacy that his followers pass along this prayer, and perform this service for whoever would desire to have it. As I listened to the words of this prayer, I felt there was a need to understand what is believed to be taking place within the soul of the woman as the prayer is being offered. “At that moment, [when the serviteur puts his hands upon the woman’s head] he is conferring on her the power of the Holy Spirit, and is cleansing her body from the corruption which goes on here on earth. I know that you understand some of what we believe, and I have told you that this earth was made for Lucibel,<sup>6</sup> it has part of his corruption within everything; and by doing this, we are preventing this influence to spread into the life of the child” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014).

Of course, it was also explained to me that the serviteur is working in the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is God himself who actually cleanses the womb, the serviteur merely affects this change. “When the Angel appeared to Mary, in the Bible, what was he doing? I will tell you, that he was doing two things, one was obvious and the other was less so: for one, he was telling her that she was going to bear the messiah, the second person in the Trinity, and the second part, her womb was being blessed to receive him. Also, when Mary met with Elizabeth, and it talks about the baby jumping in the womb, what was that? It is exactly what is going on here. Except, now because the Master has come, he has shown us exactly how to do it. There is no confusion!” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014)

Over and over again, there is this certainty that is expressed in a profound conviction of the absolute understanding of the Mission, and its beliefs and claims, and that definitely has the effect of solidifying gender roles and representation. If one accepts the cosmology of the Mission, there does not seem to be much wiggle room in regards for looking at one’s own purpose, and for women, this choice is made for them, and institutionalized in their community structure. Women have a role that no one else can fill, and their wombs hold the future of humankind, so they should bring forth many children. As has been discussed previously, the Mission is not alone in seeing children as being spiritual and physical progeny; and like the Quiverfull movement, they see the right role of the woman to be in the home, and to be mother to many children. However, what is distinct about the Mission, is that since it is so important for women to have

children, blessed children, indeed because it is the entire reason that God was incarnated in ERL, it seems to provide even less choice in determining their own lives than is available for the Quiverfull women.

Although bearing children is considered to be the most important role that a woman have in Mission understanding, it does seem that economic factors are taken seriously, and I found many female members of the community work outside the home. I think that given the group's origins among the working classes, the facts of daily life were very important. Women were looked toward for providing economic revenue, and as a result there is little stigma toward women who work outside the home. Although, I would hazard to say that working within the home is still considered a woman's ideal job. Another aspect, which has been touched on slightly previously, women also make a place for themselves in the worship ceremonies also.

In the Mission, it is the privilege of men alone to go up to the podium and give an address; however, after the men are finished speaking, an opportunity opens for question and answers. Coded in the form of questions, the women generally offer lengthy commentary before coming to a specific question, and this allows an opportunity for women to get across what it is that they would like to say in the course of the service. For instance, to get to a question about a specific event, a woman might recount what her distinct interpretation was, and then ask if she had gotten it right, forcing a dialogue to take place. Also, although I can only speak from observation from a few worship ceremonies, it did seem as



though women were three times more likely to ask a question than their male counter-parts; I feel the reason behind this is obvious enough.

So, with understanding that for members of the Mission the world, the physical plane, is shaped and born through and in iniquity and evil, and that souls cycle again and again, it becomes clearer about why it is that members of these communities place such a high emphasis on the blessing of the wombs as a means of human salvation. The way that I came to understand it, and the way that I relayed it to the people that I was going to be working with, was like this: Since the world is born of corruption, and since matter was created for those souls which fell with Satan, this is why the influx of the power of God must be called in. It is a way of nipping the problems of the world in the bud, by creating a sacred space where the soul could become strong to the temptations of the world.

The statements echoed in the last couple of sentences mark the way that I wanted to approach and reproduce the beliefs of my community, and I was astounded at the many times that I wanted to retell the sacred theology of this community back to members in an effort to see if there was anything that I completely overlooked or did not address. In every event, this did not seem to be the case, and there was not one event in which a member of the community stormed off after saying that I had completely misrepresented the core tenets of their faith. However, this led me to question the role of my retelling, and what it is that I was doing, really?

After coming into contact with the work of Elaine Lawless, a folklorist who worked extensively with female Pentecostal preachers, I found an answer to what

it was that I was seeking to do intuitively. Lawless asks what role does the researcher's personal experience and views play into the development of their research: "How does our presence in a cultural context different from our own affect the context? And, by extension, how does our presence, and all the cultural baggage we bring with us, affect what we say about what we see and hear? The final phase of the hermeneutic circle, then, demands that we subject our interpretations to the interpretations of our subjects" (Lawless, 1992:313). Her approach, commonly referred to in modern scholarship as "reciprocal ethnography," was a major influence on the way that I wanted to pursue this topic.

I really liked her insistence that the researcher bring their assertions to the consciousness of their collaborators. I modified Lawless's concept of collaboration to fit within the oral format which I used in conducting fieldwork. Also, much of this research was written from the point of view of someone who was in many ways appalled at the way that this movement had been treated in the past, and in some ways, there is a strong activist voice in this work, which I fear might cloud over some of the more negative ideas of the movement, and paint perhaps a too sunny of a picture. But, this concern goes along with taking on any research, because stigma and external judgments are a component of every single topic. Both positive opinions, which tend to wax "pretty" and negative opinions which tend to emphasize criticism, each has its own set of abstractions, and indeed by focusing on content to the extent that I have in this thesis, I have tried to the best of my abilities to not fall easily into either one of these traps.

However, as is often the case with things, I figured out very quickly what it was that I did not want to do: I did not want to go on a fact-finding mission to expose the “real” story behind the movement, that I was seeking an expose of this bizarre religion and its mad messiah. Although I acknowledge that this would not be the “typical” response of an academic, I do believe that there remains some elements of condescension in the study of marginal religious movements. I just wanted to write something that I felt they could relate to, and made a commitment to disclose the findings of my research with the group, although, I also stated that it would ultimately be my decision on what I included in the topic; to be frank, I was surprised at their confidence, with one member saying, “when you’re done we will put it on the website.” (St. Paul, 2014) I would also understand that for many this could be called a bias. Which Becker describes as: “an accusation [of bias] arises when the research gives credence, in any serious way, to the perspective of the subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship. In other words, we provoke the charge of bias, in ourselves and others, by refusing to give credence and deference to an established status order, in which knowledge and truth and the right to be heard are not equally distributed. “Everyone knows” that responsible professionals know more about things than lay people” (Becker 1970:125-127).

I recognize this, and I am certainly not advocating that there is no need for any critical response to the teachings of the movement, this is a very needed thing; however, with so much criticism, and so many writings which shift toward the establishment of this hyper-critical academic atmosphere, I felt that there was

a needed bias, at least to the point where I could write from their perspective. There was so much criticism that there was very little to be garnered by way of content, and I tipped it toward that side of the scale.

In doing this tipping however, I must admit something that is very disturbing for me, that the entirety of my reciprocal ethnography dealt solely with a male perspective. I had to go through the men to speak to the women, and it was the men whom I would have to discuss my findings. I was not privy to the opinions of the female members, and the precious few encounters I did have, were always unofficial. However, I also think it speaks highly of the ethnographic process, that I might acknowledge this one-sidedness and still try to approach my research from an emic perspective.

I myself did not change my opinions about the veracity of their religious claims, but by looking at the emic reasoning structures, with open-mindedness and a degree of empathy, I do feel as though I was able to capture many internal justifications, which had been sorely lost in previous scholarship. Saying all of that, however, I on more than one occasion was greatly taken back by many of the practices and beliefs that the people of the group had toward women. I can say that I saw nothing that would indicate that anyone in the community was being mistreated in even the slightest way. The problems that I did see however, were related to the ideological boundaries which were placed on women and young girls. I think that all of the discussion and requirement for women to be mothers also took something from them, their freedom. I think that there is so much that could benefit from a feminist interpretation. In particular I think that the issues

of oppression and liberation which are skirted in this chapter could be significantly expanded; but, due to the inherent tendency toward segregation that exists in the Mission, it would require access to women which I was not given. So I am left with my thoughts.

If one elevates the position of the mother to such a degree that this is the only office to which one might aspire, I think that is a serious problem. Although I did not have a great deal of access to the female members of the community, I would have loved to hear their perspectives on the woman who would say that she did not want to be a mother, or what would it be like to be told that you could not bear children. I think that the problems which arise from the elevation of motherhood are very apparent, and I would like to pursue them further, but for now I would just like to elucidate some of the lingering questions that I had at the end of this chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Rituals and the Performance of Mission Doctrine

*There really was nothing which he did not teach to us, and there was no part of life that he did not have something to speak about* (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014).

The expansive teachings that ERL and Robitaille taught also had some very real world applications. In this chapter I would like to address some of the customs and basic rituals that go along with the practice of Mission faith, and I have elected to look at these rituals and customs based around the areas where they take place. For this reason I have divided them into domestic and public categories. I feel that in doing so, we get to see more closely how the religious beliefs of this movement impact and shape the lives of its members.

I have decided to open this section on those rituals and customs associated with the house and the domestic sphere, as it seems to fit within the logic which was presented to me by a member, “like it says in the Bible, you have to start from an early age to make sure that a child follows in the way of God; this combined with the consecration is how people progress, and it is how major changes occur” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014). I should also point out that for members of the movement, there is no ideological difference between the assembly hall and the home, as they see both as two parts of the same mission.

One of the most noticeable elements of Mission worship, and indeed the way that many members of the community are easily noticeable to the outside community is the unique names of many of the members. “It is a custom in the Christian church to name people after important members of their faith, and so it is the same with us.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 28 July 2014) Thus when talking to people who have grown up in the mission, it is not uncommon to find various individuals named Flechette, Eugenetie, Eugenee, ERL, Richer, and many other names which signal loyalty to ERL and his mission. In fact it was the name of one of my collaborator’s girlfriend which originally interested him in the mission. “Her name was Richer, and I thought; ‘that’s a weird name, but didn’t think anything else about it. It was my ex-wife, who first noticed it, and said she sounds like a member of that cult.’ So yeah, the names are of great importance to our community.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 28 July 2014)

Of the five groups, I know from inside sources that four of the assemblies practice naming their children in this fashion. The only exception is the hall at Lavaltrie. In Lavaltrie a child is born with a typical Quebecois name, with a special name for them to use inside the hall.

Aside from their names, members of the Mission also have some prescribed dietary practices which are followed to greater and lesser degrees throughout the community. As a member of the Jewish faith, one of my first questions to the St. Paul community was whether or not there were any dietary restrictions which should be followed by the community. “Not that I know of. He did indicate that we could add 10 to 20 years to our lives by eating three leaf

clover salads, but obviously not exclusively. He himself enjoyed a good steak and potatoes supper like anyone else. Basically he indicated most anything was ok, but nothing in excess. He indicated that cigarettes were poison, and that people should abstain from alcohol while creating a family. Most of those at the hall have exaggerated that to say no alcohol at any time, but he didn't write that anywhere.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) Another member of the Everett community informed me, “I eat clover every day, and I really enjoy it; I mean now that there are these little clover sprouts so widely available there is little reason not to!” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014)

ERL, befitting his interest in science and matters of hygiene, was greatly concerned about the accumulation of oral germs and encouraged his followers to drink warm water on their rising from bed. “I have something that the Master told us to do which is completely free, and is one of the easiest things which you could ever do, and I promise it will make you healthier. When you get up in the morning and you have that bad taste and all of that stuff in your mouth. Go into the bathroom and run yourself a nice glass of warm water, and drink it down. It will take all of those germs which had accumulated during the night and take them away.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014) I must admit that I found the eating of clover weekly, which I still do, to have been significantly easier than the drinking of the warm water, but in doing so I was made aware of the great strides in health and hygiene which ERL wished his followers to benefit from, and in the way that through these tiny acts, one’s world is formed through



the teachings which he laid out. Members take these acts as being imbued with symbolic adhesions to the higher principles which he taught, and they see the latter to be accepted only through the former.

As has already been discussed in the previous chapter about the doctrine of childrearing, ERL had a profound interest in issues related to hygiene and sanitization. Coming from the work of David Eveleigh, who worked with the historical sources of domestic sanitation, we come to a greater understanding of the role that thoughts about human cleanliness took during the early part of the nineteenth century. (Eveleigh 2003) Although there is no suggestion that ERL had ever come into contact with the work of Mary Baker Eddy, the foundress of the Church of Christ Scientist denomination, she was only a generation prior to ERL, and of course the health philosophy of Dr. John Harvey Kellogg was widely circulated during the period (Eveleigh, 2003). In short, what I wish to show is that there was a wide theoretical and speculative community of thinkers who were considering what health was, and what were the best ways of ensuring that it is kept.

With all of the speculations related to health and hygiene, there is little wonder that so much of the work which ERL was called to complete dealt directly with matters related to the medical world. It also is fitting that his reputation as a healer had been a profound influence upon his mind, and on the shaping of his doctrines. “There is no room to doubt it, he cared for us in all the ways that a true person should care for another. He loved us body and soul and wanted very much that we should understand and care for our bodies. Although, he never elevated

the flesh higher than it should be, he always wanted us to be careful and be good stewards of our bodies.” (Everett conversations with N.M. and F.M. 27 July 2014)

Caring for those bodies, also means that for members of the Mission, there is a call to go and be with one another in services. “The Master wanted all of us who believed in his name to attend in the worship at the hall, and to understand that this is as important as anything else which could be. It is said in the writings that there were many healings which used to take place at the halls during worship, and there are many occasions where this is still the case.” (Lavaltrie telephone conversation with E.D. 8 September 2014) I further asked the member if there were any healings which still went on, and how it was that they did that, he responded: “If ERL was God, and I believe with all my heart that he was, then he is everywhere at once; and if he is everywhere at one, that means he is also here. It happens here like it does everywhere else.” (Lavaltrie telephone conversation with E.D. 8 September 2014)

At the opening and closing of every Mission service, members rise and say together an altered version of the Lord’s Prayer. True to the Catholic background that so many of the early members of the movement had, there is included a Trinitarian reference in the latter half of the prayer. In this section members add: “I believe in God, the father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ, the redeemer, and In Eugene Richer Dit La Fleche, the incarnation of the holy spirit. They reign with power and glory forever and ever, Amen.” With this initial prayer the members sit down to hear the speeches provided by the speakers of that day.

I feel that the use of words and liturgical formulas help make up for the lack of material adornments. Inside the worship hall there are no outward ritual objects, it is solely in words that sacred space is created. This reminded me of the work that Sabina Magliocco did with Californian Neo-Pagans, where they used words as a way to mark seasons that were not apparent in the areas they lived. (Magliocco 2011) In the Mission, there is a strong element that desires the low-church worship style, along with some liturgical formulations, which could throw back to their Catholic roots. The version of the Lord's Prayer which they use, is identical to the standard Roman Catholic one, with the exception of the specific mention of ERL.

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The speakers at the podium are always male, although women may participate in the service in the form of the question and answer which comes after the talk, and in the form of testimonies which likewise will be shared after the main service is over. Although I wanted to ask why it was that no females were allowed to enter the podium, I was worried about offending my collaborators and did not ask. There is no age limit for speakers, and any male who feels as though he has a call to come and preach may do so. During the assemblies which I was able to attend in two of the three halls, I was very surprised that at least fifty percent of the speakers in each place, were under the age of twenty-five. Although there does seem to be some preparation that is required to offer public addresses in all of the groups that I visited, it seems as though St. Paul is the only one of the various assemblies which has a formal

training which is required before addressing the congregation. “If someone is a good person, and has lived their life the right way, then they have the right to tell the congregation about it. And this goes for anyone in the hall. All we ask is that they take this class that we have for them, which teaches them a little bit about public speaking, and how to put together a topic which is worth speaking about, and doing it in an appropriate way.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014) When I later asked what does it mean to be living right, I was told that it dealt with moral conduct, and keeping one’s life within certain ethical boundaries: “I mean if you are a drunk, who can’t take care of their family, and if you have had fifteen wives, then it is not your place to come in and tell everyone else how to live out their faith; it’s as simple as that.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 3 August 2014)

After the speech, which is generally five minutes for newer speakers and increasing to around twenty for the more experienced, there is a period of questioning. Members raise one finger in the air and await their turn to be called on. This is also the most public of roles in which the women of the group are able to voice their opinions, and the questions are often worded in such a way so as to convey the respondents personal opinions and a moment for the speaker to reflect on their assertions. Each speaker takes and leaves the podium in silence, and there is no clapping. During my second time attending the St. Paul mission I forgot and began to clap, which was quickly shut down by my guide. I later asked at another assembly why it was that no one clapped after the speaker, and was

told; “why should you clap? They were simply saying what the Master called them to say” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014).

Music is likewise a very popular part of the worship services of the Mission, and has a long and celebrated history within the movement. Gustav Robitaille was a very accomplished musician and his sons were both members of a local Montreal symphony, a claim that I had heard several times throughout my visits with Mission members. “We have the very best music in the world, not only because we have the most correct lyrics which could be said, but also because we have le Prince’s talent” (Everett Conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014). The songs are kept in books called *Canticles* and are often Mission theology set to the tune of popular songs of the 1950s. I heard a particular arrangement “Maitre de Naitre” to a Rodgers and Hart tune. Palmer even lists his ability as a musician as one of the main reasons the Assembly at Rue Everett became so successful, which at its height had an attendance of 4,500 members (Palmer 2013). “Mission music, we think, is unique because it teaches our beliefs in a way that is enjoyable and accessible to everyone, and the fact that he used popular tunes and melodies to teach our truths, that makes it even more meaningful. We think so at least” (Everett conversation with N.M. and F.M. 27 of July, 2013).

As has been previously stated, the main worship service are led by members of the community who have been accepted as appropriate teachers of the truth, however, the higher order rituals are supposed to be performed exclusively by a group within the movement known as the serviteurs. The term

serviteur means servant, and they are the ones in whom authority has been placed to perform the rituals which ERL told his members to partake in.

ERL had ordained serviteurs from the very beginning of Mission history, and he gave the authority to Robitaille to do likewise. The role of the serviteur in many ways is no different from the role of any other follower of the movement. They attend services, listen to the teachings of the other speakers, and are treated as elders within the community. However, in addition to all of the responsibilities of a typical member of the community, the serviteur is also designated as the hand of the Master, who perform the most sacred Mission rites. “What is a serviteur? They are servants of God, as simple as that. They have been entrusted with the power to really heal the world and to be, if you would, the hands of God. They are not like the priests of the Catholic Church, I mean anyone could be a priest! No, these people were selected by God, and by Robitaille, to perform the works of the Master. So they are special” (Everett conversation with N.M. 9 March 2014).

Throughout the letters, when ERL is encouraging his followers, most of whom during this period were back in the settlement of Rhode Island, it is a frequently the serviteurs who he address; and to them does he lay the responsibility of leadership.

All servants are chosen of the Lord.’ I cannot sufficiently thank those souls which have entered into the kingdom. They can remain secure in their enthusiasm. Great thanks is given for the glory and power that God has done through your hands. Be honored also, worthy servant, that God has

chosen you to manifest his power and accomplish his designs. Be blessed forever you to whom the All-Powerful has pressed on you the conviction to spread the word of the Immortal God, and in the conviction that God is the one to bestow blessing as well as punishment” (ERL *Lettres*: 7:1-3).

The last line refers to the immense responsibility that weighs upon the life of a serviteur in that they are called to fulfill the will of ERL in all manner of things, and that there is a steep penalty to be paid if individuals shirk from their duties. “Undoubtedly, one of the reasons that the mission is not more widely known today, without a doubt, it is because of the failure that a great many of the serviteurs. They were rebellious and proud, and conceited. They thought that since they had been chosen by God there was no need from them to conform. I know you said that you have read the letters of ERL? Well I’m sure that you realize by now that there was a lot to be told to the serviteurs, and that he was always having to get onto them, and make them complete their duties. There you have it.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014)

It also seems, and as Palmer has pointed out, that the disagreement between the serviteurs and Robitaille, escalated quite suddenly after the death of ERL. On 24 December 1952 (81 *era d’ERL*), Palmer makes reference to a document known as *The Agreements Between Servants*, in which Robitaille attempted to quell the growing dissent that had taken place among chosen members after the death of ERL (Palmer 2013). In this document, there is a greater emphasis placed on defining the role of the serviteur, and what it is exactly that the serviteur is to give to the community. Also, there is a sufficient

introduction of one of the most interesting situations that has arisen in the course of Mission history, who is it exactly who has the power to ordain a serviteur?

Of the three groups that I have spoken with, only the Lavaltrie group actively ordains current members of their congregations to be serviteurs. The other two have a hardline reading of the doctrines of the movement and consider the ability to ordain serviteurs to be the exclusive ability of ERL and of Robitaille; the latter of course being the hand of ERL after his bodily incarnation had passed. However, the community is facing a crisis, due to the fact that the current pool of living serviteurs has been decreasing steadily.

One of the last serviteur of the St. Paul community, M. Giles Francoeur (there was another one M. Reid, but did not serve a long time) died in 2013, and this led to a great deal of soul-searching within the community (St. Paul email from G.B. 16 February 2014). “We had our celebration (ERL’s birthday) without M. Francoeur, and it was very sad.” (St. Paul email from G. B. 30 April 2014) Without a serviteur, the community looked back at the writings of the founder to find a solution to what was happening within the movement. “ERL told us that we would never be without a serviteur, so this leads us to think that there might be a serviteur already in our congregation, we just don’t know where they are.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) This led me to ask what might go into finding a serviteur: “Well, it would seem to me that he would feel like he has two minds in his heads, and that has to be confusing. So I guess that would be the first thing that might let us know that a serviteur has been incarnated. You know we do believe in reincarnation you know? ERL also said, that we would be very



surprised where the serviteur might come from. Which leads me to think he could come from anywhere.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014).

However, although the issue about finding a serviteur is something that is hotly considered in Mission doctrine, what is for certain is that throughout the groups which I worked with the ritual responsibility of the serviteur has been somewhat constant: as serviteurs they are responsible for the four main ceremonies of Mission faith, the consecration of the womb, the consecrating of new members, marriage, and the laying on of hands (Baptism). Although the first of these issues has been discussed in chapter three, the other three form the main rituals associated with the daily life of the members.

The first of the ceremonies which I will be considering is that of the initiation of new members, *Cérémonie d'Adhésion*. This ceremony, which is used by all of the branches of the mission, was formulated by ERL in the years between 1914-5, and is the formal moment when an outsider becomes an initiated part of the community (Berube, 2014). “Well the first thing you do is you start attending the assemblies. Then if you express interest in what we believe, and study, then you can be welcomed in by the community at the commitment ceremony” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014). During this service, the new member is brought forth during an assembly, and faces the serviteur. The serviteur then offers a prayer in which he recounts the sins of humanity, and prays that the new member will be a part of God’s will for humanity.

O Sovereign Father and Absolute Master, we ask that you would kindly guide us and never abandon us, and do not allow our

children to be led astray into evil and temptations, as has been our fathers who were deprived of the knowledge of the light. We will form a union in your person.

After this the serviteur leads them through a communion service, which is without any material elements, but is seen to be “a communion of truth and of reality.” This is basically a call that members should work to ensure that they are portions of the people who are tasked with “accomplishing the reign of the father on earth” (Berube 2014).

After this period the member is now allowed to be a sanctioned member of the community, and is allowed to be a participant in all of the community’s projects. One of the informants who worked with me was a convert to the Mission explained the process to me. “After you go through this ceremony, and are made a part of the great work which was accomplished here, you feel this great sense of connection. You know that these people are here for you, and that they will try with all of their heart to make you feel as though you are one.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1<sup>st</sup> August 2014) In the letters of ERL, there is likewise a discussion about the faithful of the mission of being as one body, and at times the language becomes ambiguous as to how literally this is intended.

“I think that when ERL said that we were to be of one body, I think he meant just that. If you believe in this message you are part of a very special community, and I feel like you have to realize that. We are called to love one another, and to be in fellowship, and to share our common needs and make sure that everyone has enough” (Lavaltrie conversation with E.D. 31 July 2014).

Throughout my attendance of Mission assemblies, I was on more than one occasion surprised by the close connections that all of the members seemed to have with one another. When I asked if they felt this to be the case they responded in a manner that I think illustrates the importance of the ceremony of new members: “You know, whether you have been born into this community, or whether you have just gotten here, you are part of one family. You see in the ceremony for new members, it is called in French, the ceremony of Adhesion, and I think that you know what adhesion means in English? All of us, we are joined and stuck together in this” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 3 August 2014).

The second of the major ceremonies which are the foundation of membership in the Mission organization is the ceremony of marriage. Coming from the background and information which was provided in the third chapter, it is a very established fact that being married is an essential part of the rearing of children, and “children are what it is all about.” (St. Paul conversation with E.F. 3 August 2014)

Marriage is encouraged, and it is a very prominent feature of most of the discussion that takes place within the assembly, and it is also accounts for the family friendly atmosphere that surrounds every aspect of Mission social life. “All of us have those natural instincts you know, to want to be with someone in the physical sense. We, are not like the Catholic Church, which says that there is nothing good about having fun, and since these are natural desires, we encourage them; but we do so in a way that is responsible. This is why we encourage our young ones to get married and have a family.” (Everett conversation with N.F. 9

March 2014) I think that for the majority of us raised in Western society, marriage is generally something that is chosen in our late 20s and early 30s, and is always something that is generally “thought-over” before partaking in; I myself, being raised in a place where marriage took place at a much later age was very surprised at the young age that most of the members of the movement were married.

From a very general observation, it seemed to me that the average period in a person’s life when they would take to be wedded was in their late teens, and I met at least one couple who were wedded at sixteen. As I discussed previously, there was no overt force which required them to be married, many members felt that it was just something that needed to be done, and something that they wanted to be a participant in. (Everett and St. Paul 2014) The members are permitted to date, and to marry people from the outside, although I think there must be some pressure on the community to always seek internal marriage first. I believe that this arises from the fact that members of this religion are exceptionally marginal, and perhaps they look for members of their community to marry for the same reasons that other religions marry within their communities; you come from a similar background.

The ceremony in which marriage is conducted is like many other rituals within the Mission community, something that is without many overt ritual elements. The liturgy, which could be called the most easily identifiable ritual component of Mission worship constitutes the main body of the ceremony. There is very little appreciation for extravagance and decoration, and quite often

members of the community marry in casual clothing. I feel it is important to also indicate that while I use the term casual, I mean to say that there is no need to rent any special clothing to conduct the service, and the clothes are generally long sleeves shirts and dark pants for the men, and a nice, simple dress for the women.

The service is conducted by a serviteur, who stands before the couple and the congregation and offers a meditation on the story of Adam and Eve, and how “it is not good for man to dwell alone.” The serviteur then recounts the role of the Mission, and encourages the couple to follow through in preserving its goals. Then the serviteur addresses the fathers of the couple, and asks that they would be an important force in preserving the union of the couple. The fathers then offer a unique custom, in which they relinquish authority over their children, the formula states:

We ask, before God and you people, that the union between them would last for all time and eternity. We give them to the Holy Spirit, and ask that it is the Spirit of God who will govern them. We waive all rights to their bodies, which we have inherited from our fathers in the lineage of the flesh. We desire only that their children be sole heirs of the Spirit of God.  
(Berube 2015)

After this statement the couple make a signal of their affirmations and consent to the wishes which were expressed by their parents.

The service then enters a period where the couple express their own faith in the movement, in a three-fold statement cycle, which consist of an “act of

faith,” a request, and an offering. For the first of these, the act of faith, it is said by both of the spouses and consist of their declaration that they have believed in the teachings of ERL and of the mission and that they shall work to be a part of the deliverance which he has promised, and that they are to be parents of the children of God.

After the statement of faith, the couple then move on to ask God for understanding by which they might order their lives. “My God, I ask for the light to know you. Give me the fire of your love so that I may be ignited in your service. Make my mind open so that I may understand your designs! Give me the strength to conquer both the world and myself, and to do your will in all things.” The final statement which is made in unison by the couple is an offering of their selves to God and to his will. “The most moving part for me,” said a member of the Lavaltrie assembly, “is the moment when the couple humble themselves and give themselves entirely to God. It always gets me, and although I know that it is for the couple who is getting married, I can’t help but feel as though I am myself going through the process all over again. It is very special for me.” (Lavaltrie 2014) The text is also a beautiful statement of faith and of the devotion that members have toward their religion:

My Lord, I offer myself to you the little dust that I am, to which you have given life. I offer and give to you this little life, and I dedicate it to your service. I offer you my will, my mind, my body, my soul, and my freedom, so that now nothing belongs to me and solely to you. I humbly prostrate myself before your divine majesty, and I ask that you would purify all that

is unclean in me so that the fruit and offerings of my body might be pleasant to you: and may your Holy Spirit dwell in me for all eternity (Berube 2015).

After this ceremony, the new couple are able to partake in all of the elements of community life, and are seen as fellow workers in the great work which was started by ERL. There are other benefits which go along with being married within the Mission, the most pronounced of which is that newly married members, at least for the St. Paul community are given housing. They do not however live in a communal housing system “It is our way of doing something good, to help them be successful, that is why we put a lot of emphasis on helping newly married couple, and if there is one thing which I can say about this religion, it is that we help one another. Like this one time, I think I asked one person in the hall to help me move, and the next morning there were all of these people outside my door. ‘What is this,’ I said, ‘all these people are here to help me. We got it done in about half an hour. That is the kind of people that are here in the hall.’” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014)

The final of the rituals which are conducted outside of Mission holidays, is the laying on of hands. As with other denominations of Christianity, Mission believers have hands laid upon them as they recover from illness. This is generally done after the main service, and a member of the congregation goes up to have the serviteur lay their hands upon the person and bestow upon them the blessing of their presence. “Not everyone goes up every week or anything, I mean some do but it is uncommon, but when you are going through something which is

really challenging, it is good to have them lay their hands upon you and offer their blessing. I mean at the very least it lets you know that you are not alone in all that you are going with” (Everett conversation with N.M. and F.M. 27 July 2014).

As has been hinted at throughout this work, the calendar which governs the Mission year has two important holidays, 25 of December, and 17 of April. For members of the movement, these dates represent the two most important dates in human history, because each one represents a new revelation of the works of God, with the birth of Jesus and with the birth of ERL.

Although the birth of Christ is celebrated by members on the same day as it is celebrated in the world outside of the movement, the Mission has a very distinctive way of celebrating the date. For many, Christmas celebrations are far more secular, being primarily a day for the buying and exchanging of gifts and a time for being together with the rest of the family; however, within the context of Mission community life, the day is taken very seriously, and is celebrated with the same simplicity which is typical of the weekly assemblies. Like almost every other day of the year, the faithful assemble within their assembly halls, sing hymns, hear lectures, and the speeches are centered on remembering the birth of Jesus and understanding his role within the movement.

“Christmas for us is a very religious time, we don’t mark it with buying gifts and going about frivolously, as many in the world do. We really try to demonstrate how important that birth was, and how important it is for us to keep that in mind. So we try to do that.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2014)



The members that I spoke with, some of which came from outside the movement, see the unique way that the mission remembers the Christmas season as being greatly refreshing from what they see as the atheistic consumerism that takes place among those outside the movement, and as one member told me “before I came to the Mission, I didn’t really know what Christmas was, much less trying to find the real meaning! This is why I really appreciate the way that we do it here.” (St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014) However, it also should be said that for many within the movement, the austere way of celebrating the holiday does not also necessarily dismiss more conventional celebrations, as many of the members also use this time to visit with friends and family who are outside of the movement. “You know when I am in the Mission, I celebrate Christmas, you know, really. Then when I go home to visit with my family, who aren’t members, we do things their way when I am home, and it works out pretty well. No one judges me for that, or says anything at all, it just is the way it is, and there is no forcing of one way or another.”(St. Paul conversation with G.B. 1 August 2014)

The final ceremony, which I have left for the end because it incorporates so many of the other ceremonies, perhaps excluding marriage, is the celebration which occurs on the 17 of April. On this date, which is the only Mission ceremony which is closed off to members of the public, members gather together to remember the birth of their founder ERL in a day-long celebration. This celebration is the beginning of the Mission year, members gather together to in the assembly halls to listen to sermons and the performance of the ceremonies.

Through the documents that were given to me by members of the movement, the celebration during the time of Robitaille was highlighted by a very long sermon, in which he addressed a different topic each year on a variety of different concerns. Many of these talks were saved by members and became part of the *Les Propos* set of documents. There is singing by the congregation, and music by the Assembly orchestra, and involvement of the children in the form of skits and memory performances, where they will repeat various aspects of Mission theology, and show an awareness of the *Questionnaire*. There are testimonies given about personal faith in the teachings of the movement, and specific instances where miracles have been performed for the faithful. As with any other assembly day, there are presentations by male members of the congregation, and there is the question and answer period after the service.

Following in tradition of Robitaille, senior serviteurs are given a special role in that they will be the ones who will address the entire congregation, as a symbol of the unique role that they have in the religion. “Well we always have an address by the servietur, because it was in the same way that it was when Robitaille was alive. He would address all of the people gathered together, and would give them these amazing speeches. We try to do the same thing here, although you know no one is like *le Prince* as far as the manner of speaking, but we do what we can.” (Everett conversation with N.M. 27 July 2015) Another member from the St. Paul group told me that the 17 of April celebrations are “absolutely essential,” and he expressed deep concern over what the service would look like without the presence of a serviteur. However, when I followed up

and asked what the service looked like for 2014, he responded “it was our first year with M. F. (their serviteur) and it was very sad.” (St. Paul email with G.B. 21 December 2014)

Of course after this initial speech given by the serviteur, they then begin to move in and perform the various ceremonies of the Mission faith, including all of the ones which have been previously discussed. However, in addition to these, there are certain rituals which are to be performed exclusively during this time, or for whom there is a desire on the part of the member that the service should be performed during this special time, as was the case with the presentation of the newborn which was discussed in chapter 3. “Well, a serviteur can bless a newborn at any time during the year, but for me, when I had my children I wanted it to happen during this period because it is such a special time for us.” (St. Paul conversation with F.M. 3 August 2014)

However, one of the most prominent feature of the rituals and prayers which are celebrated during this period, are ones which circle around personal forgiveness, personal commitment to the cause, and a re-consecration of the individual members to the work which is going on before them. In Mission practice this takes two major forms: for one there is the pardon of members of the community, then there is the pardon of members of the clergy, and finally there is the personal promise of a member of the community to continue in the faith and the practice of the movement. “Like I heard about the Japanese, they want to get everything clear before they begin the New Year, I think it is the same way with us. When we get together for the 17 April, we are trying to start off the

coming year on the right track, and make sure that we commit ourselves fully to our Master and to his will for our lives.” (Everett conversation with N.M 9 march 2014)

I believe that the sentiments which were expressed in the previous quote are truly an important frame to consider as we look at the following ceremonies, and it may indeed hold the key for the why the celebration of 17 April is so important for the faithful followers of the movement. The ceremony begins with men and women going up to have hands laid upon them. The servieur places his hands upon the head of the believer and then delivers a prayer in which he tells the person that his or her sins have been forgiven them, and that the suffering and pain which comes as a result of them is banished and they are to receive the healing which God shall give them. The latter part of the prayer eloquently summarizes this cathartic blessing: “Receive from my hands and in my name and in the womb, virginity; and let love and peace be your lot!” With this done, there is then a personal promise which the newly forgiven member is then expected to say after the prayer of forgiveness. In this prayer, which is seen to be completely between the person and God, they make a vow to God to continue their faithfulness in the coming year.

I see that I am burdened by the weight of the world, and am subject to its contempt and miseries; and am guilty before my Lord and my God. For this I scorn death; and with misery to my body I want to work to bring the tree of life by the knowledge of good over evil.

To this end, I renounce now and for all days men and their contempt. My mouth, my heart, and my soul shall be aware of my firm resolution and I shall have no harsh words, or harsh thoughts for others. I forbid and I renounce all of these things, because I go to God, and his love, because I want to be completely his.

May this grace keep me from all defilement, so that I might confess in him and his kingdom with sincerity and conviction and receive my pardon in his name, to be a part of his body, in his kingdom, in his reign, on earth as it is in heaven; and he shall be my sole protector as also my sole good (Berube 2015).

In the case of the pardon for members of the clergy, there is a similar formula of forgiveness, but the unique thing about the forgiveness of the clergy, which could be expected, is that they are given forgiveness so that they might perform the work which was initiated by ERL. “To accomplish this ministry, I by you reclaim the world by my proper authority.” (Berube 2015) “Back in the days when ERL was still around, he had all knowledge, you know, and he could look at people and know all of their sins, stuff that no one else knew, and he would call it out. Now sometimes he did this in private, and sometimes he did it in public, and there are many occasions when he really came down hard on those people who claimed to be his servants. So it is very important that everyone receives forgiveness.” (Lavaltrie conversation with E.D. 31 July 2014)

In asking several of my informants, about what it was that they felt occurred for them as they attended the worship services on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April, over and over

again, I heard the response that it was a moment for them to give all that they had to God, and to start a new year with their conviction of his wonders. “I think that the April 17<sup>th</sup> celebration, is not only one of the most special days of the year for us, but I think whether or not people on the outside know it, it is special for them. I heard a phrase, in English, which is like “Angels unaware,” and I say that it is also “God unaware,” and only we are the ones to keep this in memory. This is a powerful thing for us to do. And, as I believe in these things, it is the central moment of my faith.” (Lavaltrie conversation with E.D. ii 13 October 2014)

As I finish this chapter on the rituals of the Mission, I am again taken back by the amazing way that ritual helps formulate our lives and orients us to the world at large. Over and over again, Mission ritual helps to shape and direct the lives of those who are going through it. For believers, these rituals help instill the fact that they are descendants and participants in the highest mystery that has ever come to pass. Their lives are a testimony to their belief that the Holy Spirit “became flesh and dwelt among them.” It is important to keep that in mind while reading about these occurrences, and it is important to understand that to those involved, these rituals are the highest expressions of the sacred.

## Conclusion

*“You know whatever you want to say about what they believe, they are nice people; and their kids are very well-behaved.”*

Kevin Klein in the 2010 film, *The Extra Man*, makes a statement that I feel is very appropriate to the way that I feel looking at the end of this project with the Mission: “here we are...and where are we?” It is always difficult to summarize something that you have worked on for any length of time, and I feel this doubly upon working with this subject. What started out as a curiosity has now merged into a set of personal relationships, dear friends that I got to know during my research, and some wonderful memories that I have discussing theology in the beautiful Quebec summer. As I close this thesis, I am amazed at how far I have come in my understanding about this group, and I am see that there are many ways for me to expand my research, many areas that still need consideration. I would like to take this work’s final portion and describe both where I end this thesis, and the work that could be taken further on.

To begin with I think that the most major contribution that I have made in this work is that I have provided a thorough overview of the beliefs and rituals of the Mission. I wrote from my perception of where the need is, and this thesis is very much the result of that. Up until now, the only information that was available about this religion in English consisted in two articles; both of which did not focus exclusively on either belief or ritual. Also as I was allowed access to

the writings of the movement, this also makes my paper significant. Previous scholarship was limited to only a few texts, and often only in pieces. The amount of reading that I was permitted to do added a very thorough context that I felt was missing from earlier accounts.

Also my work is unique in that it is the most thorough ethnographic study of this movement that is currently available. Previous writings about the movement have for the most part been written outside the contribution of the movement. However I wanted the beliefs which the faithful had to be transmitted in their own voices, as much as possible.

Although I would be the first to say that this work is light on theoretical perspectives, I think it is a practical example of how to deal with movements who are significantly outside of the mainstream. There is a great deal of suffering in the world, and indeed not all ideas are created equal, and some are just difficult to accept on any circumstance, and this is all the more reason, to push the need for respect to the front of your mind. I could not tell the many times that I encountered things in the writings and beliefs of the Mission that I found to be completely against my own personal beliefs, it had to have happened at least a hundred times, and as I have expressed, I would come across things that would freeze me in my tracks upon reading them; however, through those dark experiences, another motivation had to lead me, and that was to give these people, many of whom had been exceptionally kind to me, the benefit to be heard. To push through my own preconceived notions about how it was that they



thought, and how wacky many of the ideas might seem, and try to get at what it is that they were saying.

I feel like many of us are more likely to be harsher on alternative belief structures because they present a very formidable challenge to the basic constructions through which we understand the world. Academic or non-academic, we have a desire to meet an opposing worldview with scorn, or at the very least, some eye-rolling; and with a subject as powerful as religious belief, which has the capacity to shake the world, I feel that we must be most careful in dealing with these matters, and must respect them for the people who find value in believing them. Our collaborators understand that we do not share the same beliefs as they share, we ourselves know that we do not have the same belief systems, and the thing that keeps us civil and opens the doors for our mutual understanding is their trust that the researcher will push one step below the surface, and try to make our points with grace and with empathy.

There is a strong tendency among folklorists today to blur the line between researcher and activist, and to use research to advocate for certain practical ends, or to call attention to certain issues which need to be considered. At no point would I deny that this is needed, and I fully concede that there are certain issues which folklorists could bring an untold degree of insight. However, I also feel, as was the intention of this thesis, that there also needs to be a place for understanding the other, regardless of the degree of public acceptability their ideas might receive.

If we go so far into an activist model that we lose all focus on understanding our collaborators, then we do so at our peril. If we lose the trust of our subjects, and they feel that we will not make the effort to plunge the depths of our research, then we become another embankment to shared understanding.

I feel that one of the primary things that people need to understand about marginal religious movements, is that for the people involved, their entire direction in life is taken from their religious beliefs. As a result, when one goes into a marginal religious community, one is not only entering just another religious institution, but an entire world of new and different nuances. It is this spatial metaphor that intrigues me so much, and is part of the reason that I like the term marginal religion, over some of the other terms used to describe these types of movements. Also, although I did not want to offer another definition of an exceptionally complicated issue, I feel that I must.

My work with the Mission, with their cosmological and ideological uniqueness made me truly see that many religions are themselves alternate ideological dimensions, with cultures and rules for behavior that can be utterly alternate from the broader cultures around them. Acknowledging this, I have come to understand that a marginal religion is: an organized system of religious facts, transmitted and determined by a vernacular group, existing in an oppositional/elevational stance toward the (secular/broad culture) world. Or, a self-determined, and group maintained religious dimension. I believe that only by respecting the otherness of groups like the Mission can we ever truly make any strides to understanding them.

However, there is still so much to be done! I feel that one of the most important elements that could be added to my research would be the inclusion of a feminist perspective, or a paper that included many female voices. Due to the particular nature of the Mission, I was not made privy to that as a man; and the thesis is poorer for it. I feel that even with one main female collaborator would have really have made a positive difference. I also think that there are numerous other interpretative systems that could add a tremendous deal of insight to this topic, and I would be particularly like to see a Marxist interpretation of some of the communitarian elements of the Mission.

However, what I would most desire, for the field of marginal religion in general, is the participation of other folklorists. I think of all the other disciplines, folklore is the one that is most uniquely geared toward understanding and interpreting marginal religious beliefs. For one, there has been a long tradition of folklorists who have worked with marginal communities, indeed I feel as though some people would argue that this is the definition of a folk-group. Secondly, we are a field which embraces the particular and the specific. This tendency I feel will give us an edge in understanding nuance and context, both of which are exceptionally important in marginal religious theology.

Also, as our field has been historically associated with the oral, I feel that our ethnographic models provide a brilliant catalyst through which understanding might be possible. Indeed I feel that we have many great examples of great ethnographic practice with marginal groups, with Lawless and Primiano being the top of the proverbial ice-burg. For any and all of these reasons I feel

that folklorists make an ideal pool to consider the beliefs of marginal religion, and I look forward to seeing the future work that folklorist will pursue on this topic.

Finally if there was one comment that I would hope someone would make about this paper, it is that they would recognize the great strides that I took to define the beliefs of my collaborators, that I tried to highlight their voice, and in the midst of that to capture the tiniest essence of the wonder with which they approach their religious beliefs. If anyone sees any of this then I feel as though I have achieved everything that I wished to.

## End Notes

1. Although I have chosen to use the more formal way of referring to Eugene Richer dit La Fleche, as ERL, in most of the quotes, he will be referred to as "The Master." Although both terms are considered respectful, I felt it to be more apt to my purposes to use the more formal designation.
2. I would like to use this moment to address some issues that I had in the citing of interior religious documents. For one, considering that many of the documents have been self-published and circulated within the group itself, some of the clarity regarding publishing dates remain unclear. I cited the *Testimonies* by Robitaille as 2013, although this is only the date of the most recent edition. I have had oral confirmation, that the date for both the *Testimonies* and *Questionnaire* is 1962, although from looking at the history of the movement, I believe both to have been written previously. Furthermore, there are also some discrepancies between how the movement refers to various portions of their incredibly large canon of writings. Some of the earlier documents are cited with some degree of universality, however there still remain differences in citation from group to group. Acknowledging this, I decided to cite the material in accordance with group consensus, but I acknowledge that there are many citation disagreements among the various groups.
3. This is to distinguish that I was told a similar line by two different members of the St. Paul group; this comes from a passing conversation that I had after an assembly, the other quote which comes from a larger dialogue with my mother, comes from an interview session. I thought that there might be some text that is being cited due to the similarity of the quotes, but have been unable to locate one specifically.
4. I put this in bold to distinguish the question from the answer. In the original document, the catechistical questions are made bold, and the answer follows, so I kept this same format.
5. I decided to use the Authorized Version of the Bible, because it was said to be equivalent, by a member of the St. Paul Assembly. Although they did not provide the full text from John 16:13, they paraphrased it, and I quoted it in English, it also appears on the St. Paul communities website. Furthermore, it is not clear which translation ERL used; However, due to the widespread use of the 1843 *Sainte Bible* or also known as the *Bible de Tours*, translated by Jean Jacques Bourassé and Pierre Désiré Janvier, it would be my guess that it was this version.
6. In Mission doctrine the Devil is referred to as Lucibel. In a communication from the Everett community, I was told this about the subject: Étudions maintenant comment l'Éternel forma la terre. Une planète préexistait la nôtre; révéla un jour le Maître. Elle portait le nom de Ciel. Ciel signifie "lumineuse demeure de Dieu". C'est pourquoi Christ dira: Notre Père qui est au Ciel. C'est-à-dire dans le "Séjour de la Lumière". Cette planète était habitée par des êtres féconds et myriadaires. L'Éternel habitait invisiblement au milieu d'eux. Il se manifestait à un seul être nommé Lucibel en raison de son genie brillant. C'était un séraphin. Or

séraphin signifie "brûlant". Lucibel fut assigné comme intermédiaire entre l'invisible Esprit et les habitants célestes. Il transmettait à ses frères les injonctions et les volontés divines, parce qu'il était seul à pouvoir approcher Dieu. Infatué par sa position et l'ostensible préférence que le Maître lui déférait, il s'enorgueillit, comme eut fait tout autre à sa place. Sachant que ses subalternes ne pouvaient causer avec ni voir l'Infini, il résolut dans sa prétentieuse caboche d'agir comme le Créateur, en souverain, en commandeur, en Dieu.

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